THE LIFE WE LONG TO LIVE:

an introduction
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I believe the American writer Henry David Thoreau was on to something when he described the human condition as one of quiet desperation. No matter our age, our circumstance of life or our present spirituality, each one of us confronts in our inner world the discomforting truth that there is a gnawing gap between the life we long to live and the life we live. But can this gap we feel so deeply in the core of our being be closed? Can we truly live the life we long to live, a life of invigorating intimacy, integral wholeness and meaningful purpose?

Pressing into the Christian story found in the Bible we discover some very good news. The life we long to live is the life we were originally designed to live and it is the life that, Jesus, as Creator and Redeemer, makes possible for us to live. Our broken lives and our broken world can be made whole again. The quiet desperation we so often feel can become a joyful delight we experience each and every day.

I am excited you are joining us in exploring the Christian story and the good news it brings. I know my life has been profoundly changed by this story and my hope is yours will be too.

Tom Nelson
Senior Pastor, Christ Community Church
What is the good life? What is the life we long to live?

Even if we have never given this question much sustained thought, we are answering it every day of our lives. The things that fill our attention, drain our checkbooks, and consume our time, answer what we think the good life is. And if we are candid, we know that the things we hope will give us life, the things that get our time, our money, our passion, ultimately do not give us the life we long for. Even if everything we hope for becomes reality, there is always something missing. There is a gap between the life we long for and the life we live.

The Bible is honest about this gap, but it also offers hope that this gap can be closed, that we can live a life of wholeness. The Bible uses a term that captures this kind of life, the Hebrew word tome. A tome life is an integral and whole life, the life we are designed for, the life that so often seems out of our reach.
But there is good news. There is One who has lived the life we long to live. There is One who can close the gap between the life you long for and the life you live, who can lead you into a life of wholeness and integrity.

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.* (John 10:10)

Jesus has come because He knows the way to a tome life. He knows, far better than us, the life we long to live. And this life He offers us does not simply mean that our sins can be forgiven or that we will go to heaven one day. Jesus’ vision of the good life, the abundant life, is far richer, and begins now.

**The life we long to live is one where we walk in intimacy with the God who made us.** God has designed us, created us, and as our designer, only He can know what will most fulfill us. Do you know the life God longs for you to live? Has God redefined your vocation, your family, your identity, that you may live the life you are designed for?

We are filled with messages that try to convince us that the good life is found in other things: sex, how much money we make, how far we ascend in our vocations, how our kids turn out. All of these may be good things by themselves, but they cannot give us a truly rich life.

As we begin this journey together to seek the life we long to live, there are two things we must understand.

**Jesus will redefine the vision of the life we long to live.** He alone has lived a truly tome life, so He alone can show us the way. Let Him reshape what you hope for, what gives you joy, your vocation, your family, everything about you. He knows what will ultimately fulfill you. Therefore, the life we long to live first assumes a posture of following after Jesus.
**We cannot live the life we long to live alone.** We need others around us, encouraging us, praying for us, and walking with us. Jesus alone may know the way to the tome life, but He will always use His church to sharpen, guide, and walk with us. That is why it is so important to surround ourselves with a community of people following Jesus. As you gather, remember that you are not just surrounded by people, but the body of Christ whom God will use to help lead you into a tome life. Commit to those around you, to pray for them, to encourage them as you all follow after Jesus, seeking the life we long to live.

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**Gather Together**

*Watch the video for Session 1.*
As a group discuss the following.

- What is the best movie or TV show you have seen lately, or the best book you have read lately? How would you say it defined what the “good life” is?

- Tom talked about the gap between the life we long to live and the life we actually live. How have you sensed this tension Tom talked about? What causes you frustration and disappointment in this life?

- Read Genesis 17:1-6. Why do you think God’s invitation to Abraham began with “walk before me” (literally, “walk before my face”)? Why do you think intimacy with God is so important to living the life we long to live?

- God invites Abraham to a life of fruitfulness (v 6). What would you say a fruitful life should look like? What did a fruitful life look like for Abraham? What would a fruitful life look like for you?

Break into smaller groups of 3-4 and discuss the following.

- Tom said God invites Abraham to a life of intimacy with God, integrity before God, and influence for God. If you had to choose one of these three, in which area do you feel you need the most change? Why?

- Once everyone has shared, spend time praying that the others in your group would grow in intimacy with God, integrity before God, and influence for God. Pray that God would use this season of their life to sharpen them wherever they are weak.

- After you are done praying, encourage one another by reading together John 10:7-11, the words of Jesus’ invitation to an abundant life, the life we long to live.
PREPARE FOR SESSION 2

In preparation for the next Group Gathering, read and complete the Overview, Reflection, and Engagement sections of Session 2 (pages 13 - 33).
OVERVIEW

Is it possible, given who we are and the world we live in, for us to live the life we long to live? Can we be rescued from our destructive patterns of living that wreak havoc in our lives and in the lives of those around us?

The Bible says God is both good and just, and because of that, He will eradicate all injustice, pride, selfishness, and evil from the world He made. Initially, this sounds like good news, but Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author who suffered terribly in the Gulag, suggests maybe this is not the good news we think it is:

“If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? (The Gulag Archipelago)\(^a\)

If God is going to deal with evil, it will mean dealing with us, the ones who have both wittingly and unwittingly contributed to the brokenness of this world. How

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are we to walk in intimacy with this God, who if He is truly just, must judge the evil present in us? How can we walk in intimacy with a God who sees every thought in our mind and every desire of our heart?

To live the life we long for will not mean cleaning up our acts or softening our rough edges. We need to be rescued. We need a God who can save us. This is why the cross is so central to the life we long to live. The cross is what makes it possible for God to set the world right without destroying us, enabling us to enter the life God has designed for us.

**The cross enables us to walk in intimacy with God.** Nothing stands between you and an intimate walk before God. If you feel unworthy, Christ’s cross has made you worthy. If you are unsure of God’s love for you, Christ’s cross shows the depth of God’s love for you. If you are burdened by your circumstances, Christ’s cross shows you God has power over every circumstance in this world, even death. We have amazing access to our God, who encourages us to approach Him as a child does a father, all because of the cross.

**The cross reshapes our identity.** The cross reveals to us the absurdity of looking to anything but Christ as our ultimate joy. There are many things we may try to build our lives on - money, sex, fame, career, influence - but none of those things can give us the life we long for, because none of those things will ever die for us. They will never give the joy, the hope, the love Christ gives, all because of His cross.

**The cross empowers true community.** Community is often riddled with disputes, misunderstandings, frustration, and abandonment. But the cross enables us to have a community marked by repentance and forgiveness.

The cross frees us to admit our sin before others because we can rest in the forgiveness it brings. We are able to heal disputes and disagreements because the cross gives us the strength to seek forgiveness from those we have wronged.
Most importantly, a community empowered by the cross never uses the sin of others as a cause for their condemnation, but always as a reason to pray for and encourage them. Those who look to the cross can forgive those around them in community because they understand the extent to which God has forgiven them. The cross gives community a deep resource of love that creates a space where fellow disciples of Christ are accepted fully, encouraged faithfully, and loved unconditionally.

The cross opens the door to the life we long to live. Few authors have captured the significance of the cross with the power and poignancy of Tim Keller. In his chapter “The (True) Story of the Cross” from The Reason for God, Keller lays out the nature of how God has forgiven us, how God has substituted His Son on our behalf, and how the cross frees us to live the life we long to live.

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**Reflection**

Read the following excerpt.

Chapter 12: The (True) Story of the Cross
From *The Reason for God* by Tim Keller.

*I could accept Jesus as a martyr, and embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept.*

—Gandhi, *An Autobiography*

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I would catch a glimpse of the cross—and suddenly my heart would stand still. In an instinctive, intuitive way I understood that something more important, more tumultuous, more passionate, was at issue than our good causes, however noble they might be. . . . I should have worn it. . . . It should have been my uniform, my language, my life. I shall have no excuse; I can’t say I didn’t know. I knew from the beginning, and turned away.

— Malcolm Muggeridge, Jesus Rediscovered

The primary symbol of Christianity has always been the cross. The death of Jesus for our sins is at the heart of the gospel, the good news. Increasingly, however, what the Christian church has considered good news is considered by the rest of our culture to be bad news.

In the Christian account, Jesus dies so that God can forgive sins. For many, that seems ludicrous or even sinister. “Why would Jesus have to die?” is a question that I have heard from people in New York far more often than “Does God exist?” “Why couldn’t God just forgive us?” they ask. “The Christian God sounds like the vengeful gods of primitive times who needed to be appeased by human sacrifice.” Why can’t God just accept everyone or at least those who are sorry for their wrongdoings? While the Christian doctrine of the cross confuses some people, it alarms others. Some liberal Protestant theologians reject the doctrine of the cross altogether because it looks to them like “divine child abuse.”

Why, then, don’t we just leave the Cross out? Why not focus on the life of Jesus and his teachings rather than on his death? Why did Jesus have to die?

**The First Reason: Real Forgiveness Is Costly Suffering**

Let’s begin with a purely economic example. Imagine that someone borrows your car, and as he backs it out of the driveway he strikes a gate, knocking it down along with part of a wall. Your property insurance doesn’t cover the
gate and garden wall. What can you do? There are essentially two options. The first is to demand that he pay for the damages. The second is to refuse to let him pay anything. There may also be middle-of-the-road solutions in which you both share the payment. Notice that in every option the cost of the damage must be borne by someone. Either you or he absorbs the cost for the deed, but the debt does not somehow vanish into thin air. Forgiveness, in this illustration, means bearing the cost for his misdeed yourself.

Most of the wrongs done to us cannot be assessed in purely economic terms. Someone may have robbed you of some happiness, reputation, opportunity, or certain aspects of your freedom. No price tag can be put on such things, yet we still have a sense of violated justice that does not go away when the other person says, “I’m really sorry.” When we are seriously wronged we have an indelible sense that the perpetrators have incurred a debt that must be dealt with. Once you have been wronged and you realize there is a just debt that can’t simply be dismissed—there are only two things to do.

The first option is to seek ways to make the perpetrators suffer for what they have done. You can withhold relationship and actively initiate or passively wish for some kind of pain in their lives commensurate to what you experienced. There are many ways to do this. You can viciously confront them, saying things that hurt. You can go around to others to tarnish their reputation. If the perpetrators suffer, you may begin to feel a certain satisfaction, feeling that they are now paying off their debt.

There are some serious problems with this option, however. You may become harder and colder, more self-pitying, and therefore more self-absorbed. If the wrongdoer was a person of wealth or authority you may instinctively dislike and resist that sort of person for the rest of your life. If it was a person of the opposite sex or another race you might become permanently cynical and prejudiced against whole classes of people. In
addition, the perpetrator and his friends and family often feel they have the right to respond to your payback in kind. Cycles of reaction and retaliation can go on for years. Evil has been done to you—yes. But when you try to get payment through revenge the evil does not disappear. Instead it spreads, and it spreads most tragically of all into you and your own character.

There is another option, however. You can forgive. Forgiveness means refusing to make them pay for what they did. However, to refrain from lashing out at someone when you want to do so with all your being is agony. It is a form of suffering. You not only suffer the original loss of happiness, reputation, and opportunity, but now you forgo the consolation of inflicting the same on them. You are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out of the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death.

Yes, but it is a death that leads to resurrection instead of the lifelong living death of bitterness and cynicism. As a pastor I have counseled many people about forgiveness, and I have found that if they do this—if they simply refuse to take vengeance on the wrongdoer in action and even in their inner fantasies—the anger slowly begins to subside. You are not giving it any fuel and so the resentment burns lower and lower. C. S. Lewis wrote in one of his Letters to Malcolm that “last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had really forgiven someone I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might.” I remember once counseling a sixteen-year-old girl about the anger she felt toward her father. We weren’t getting anywhere until I said to her, “Your father has defeated you, as long as you hate him. You will stay trapped in your anger unless you forgive him thoroughly from the heart and begin to love him.” Something thawed in her when she realized that. She went through the suffering of costly forgiveness, which at first always feels far worse than bitterness, into eventual freedom. Forgiveness must be granted before it can be felt, but it
does come eventually. It leads to a new peace, a resurrection. It is the only way to stop the spread of the evil.

When I counsel forgiveness to people who have been harmed, they often ask about the wrongdoers, “Shouldn’t they be held accountable?” I usually respond, “Yes, but only if you forgive them.” There are many good reasons that we should want to confront wrongdoers. Wrongdoers have inflicted damage and, as in the example of the gate I presented earlier, it costs something to fix the damage. We should confront wrongdoers—to wake them up to their real character, to move them to repair their relationships, or to at least constrain them and protect others from being harmed by them in the future. Notice, however, that all those reasons for confrontation are reasons of love. The best way to love them and the other potential victims around them is to confront them in the hope that they will repent, change, and make things right.

The desire for vengeance, however, is motivated not by goodwill but by ill will. You may say, “I just want to hold them accountable,” but your real motivation may be simply to see them hurt. If you are not confronting them for their sake or for society’s sake but for your own sake, just for payback, the chance of the wrongdoer ever coming to repentance is virtually nil. In such a case you, the confronter, will overreach, seeking not justice but revenge, not their change but their pain. Your demands will be excessive and your attitude abusive. He or she will rightly see the confrontation as intended simply to cause hurt. A cycle of retaliation will begin.

Only if you first seek inner forgiveness will your confrontation be temperate, wise, and gracious. Only when you have lost the need to see the other person hurt will you have any chance of actually bringing about change, reconciliation, and healing. You have to submit to the costly suffering and death of forgiveness if there is going to be any resurrection.
No one embodied the costliness of forgiveness any better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose story I recounted in Chapter 4. After Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to resist Hitler, he wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) that true forgiveness is always a form of suffering.

> My brother’s burden which I must bear is not only his outward lot, his natural characteristics and gifts, but quite literally his sin. And the only way to bear that sin is by forgiving it in the power of the cross of Christ in which I now share. . . . Forgiveness is the Christlike suffering which it is the Christian’s duty to bear.

In April 1943 Bonhoeffer was arrested and imprisoned. He was eventually moved to Flossenburg concentration camp and executed just before the end of World War II.

How did Bonhoeffer live out his own words? His forgiveness was costly suffering, because it actually confronted the hurt and evil before him. His forgiveness was not what he called (in *The Cost of Discipleship*) “cheap grace.” He did not ignore or excuse sin. He resisted it head on, even though it cost him everything. His forgiveness was also costly because he refused to hate. He passed through the agonizing process required to love your enemies, so his resistance to their evildoing was measured and courageous, not venomous and cruel. The startling evidence for this is found in the letters and papers that Bonhoeffer wrote while in prison. The lack of bitterness was remarkable.

> Please don’t ever get anxious or worried about me, but don’t forget to pray for me—I’m sure you don’t. I am so sure of God’s guiding hand that I hope I shall always be kept in that certainty. You must never doubt that I’m traveling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I’m being led. My past life is brim-full of God’s goodness and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified. . . .
Here we see Bonhoeffer simply living out what Jesus had done for him. Jesus bore his sins, bearing the cost of them. Now Bonhoeffer is free to do the same for others. Bonhoeffer uses divine forgiveness to help him understand human forgiveness. But let’s now use Bonhoeffer’s marvelous example of human forgiveness to understand the divine.

**The Forgiveness of God**

“Why did Jesus have to die? Couldn’t God just forgive us?” This is what many ask, but now we can see that no one “just” forgives, if the evil is serious. Forgiveness means bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer do it, so you can reach out in love to seek your enemy’s renewal and change. Forgiveness means absorbing the debt of the sin yourself. Everyone who forgives great evil goes through a death into resurrection, and experiences nails, blood, sweat, and tears.

Should it surprise us, then, that when God determined to forgive us rather than punish us for all the ways we have wronged him and one another, that he went to the Cross in the person of Jesus Christ and died there? As Bonhoeffer says, everyone who forgives someone bears the other’s sins. On the Cross we see God doing visibly and cosmically what every human being must do to forgive someone, though on an infinitely greater scale. I would argue, of course, that human forgiveness works this way because we unavoidably reflect the image of our Creator. That is why we should not be surprised that if we sense that the only way to triumph over evil is to go through the suffering of forgiveness, that this would be far more true of God, whose just passion to defeat evil and loving desire to forgive others are both infinitely greater than ours.

It is crucial at this point to remember that the Christian faith has always understood that Jesus Christ is God. God did not, then, inflict pain on someone else, but rather on the Cross absorbed the pain, violence, and evil of the world into himself. Therefore the God of the Bible is not like the
primitive deities who demanded our blood for their wrath to be appeased. Rather, this is a God who becomes human and offers his own lifeblood in order to honor moral justice and merciful love so that someday he can destroy all evil without destroying us.

Therefore the Cross is not simply a lovely example of sacrificial love. Throwing your life away needlessly is not admirable—it is wrong. Jesus’s death was only a good example if it was more than an example, if it was something absolutely necessary to rescue us. And it was. Why did Jesus have to die in order to forgive us? There was a debt to be paid—God himself paid it. There was a penalty to be born—God himself bore it. Forgiveness is always a form of costly suffering.

We have seen how human forgiveness and its costliness sheds light on divine forgiveness. However, it is divine forgiveness that is the ultimate ground and resource for the human. Bonhoeffer repeatedly attested to this, claiming that it was Jesus’s forgiveness of him on the Cross that gave him such a security in God’s love that he could live a life of sacrificial service to others.

**The Second Reason: Real Love Is a Personal Exchange**

In the mid-nineties, a Protestant denomination held a theological conference in which one speaker said, “I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all; I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.” Why can’t we just concentrate on teaching about how God is a God of love? The answer is that if you take away the Cross you don’t have a God of love.

In the real world of relationships it is impossible to love people with a problem or a need without in some sense sharing or even changing places with them. All real life-changing love involves some form of this kind of exchange.
It requires very little of you to love a person who is pulled together and happy. Think, however, of emotionally wounded people. There is no way to listen and love people like that and stay completely emotionally intact yourself. It may be that they may feel stronger and more affirmed as you talk, but that won’t happen without you being quite emotionally drained yourself. It’s them or you. To bring them up emotionally you must be willing to be drained emotionally.

Take another example. Imagine you come into contact with a man who is innocent, but who is being hunted down by secret agents or by the government or by some other powerful group. He reaches out to you for help. If you don’t help him, he will probably die, but if you ally with him, you—who were perfectly safe and secure—will be in mortal danger. This is the stuff that movie plots are made of. Again, it’s him or you. He will experience increased safety and security through your involvement, but only because you are willing to enter into his insecurity and vulnerability.

Consider parenting. Children come into the world in a condition of complete dependence. They cannot operate as self-sufficient, independent agents unless their parents give up much of their own independence and freedom for years. If you don’t allow your children to hinder your freedom in work and play at all, and if you only get to your children when it doesn’t inconvenience you, your children will grow up physically only. In all sorts of other ways they will remain emotionally needy, troubled, and overdependent. The choice is clear. You can either sacrifice your freedom or theirs. It’s them or you. To love your children well, you must decrease that they may increase. You must be willing to enter into the dependency they have so eventually they can experience the freedom and independence you have.

All life-changing love toward people with serious needs is a substitutional sacrifice. If you become personally involved with them, in some way, their weaknesses flow toward you as your strengths flow toward them. In The
Cross of Christ, John Stott writes that substitution is at the heart of the Christian message:

_The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We... put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God... puts himself where we deserve to be._

If that is true, how can God be a God of love if he does not become personally involved in suffering the same violence, oppression, grief, weakness, and pain that we experience? The answer to that question is twofold. First, God can’t. Second, only one major world religion even claims that God does.

**The Great Reversal**

JoAnne Terrell wrote about how her mother was murdered by her mother’s boyfriend. “I had to find a connection between my mom’s story and my story and Jesus’s story,” she said. She found it in understanding the Cross—namely, that Jesus did not only suffer for us but with us. He knew what it was like (literally) to be under the lash, and to refuse to be cowed by those in power, and to pay for it with his life. He voluntarily took his place beside those who were without power and suffering from injustice. As John Stott wrote, “I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the Cross. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?”

Therefore the Cross, when properly understood, cannot possibly be used to encourage the oppressed to simply accept violence. When Jesus suffered for us, he was honoring justice. But when Jesus suffered with us he was identifying with the oppressed of the world, not with their oppressors. All life-changing love entails an exchange, a reversal of places, but here is the Great Reversal. God, in the place of ultimate power, reverses places with the marginalized, the poor, and the oppressed. The prophets always sang
songs about God as one who has “brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the poor” (Luke 1: 52), but never could they have imagined that God himself would come down off his ultimate throne and suffer with the oppressed so that they might be lifted up.

This pattern of the Cross means that the world’s glorification of power, might, and status is exposed and defeated. On the Cross Christ wins through losing, triumphs through defeat, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. Jesus Christ turns the values of the world upside down. As N. T. Wright says:

*The real enemy, after all, was not Rome but the powers of evil that stood behind human arrogance and violence. . . . [On the cross] the kingdom of God triumphed over the kingdoms of this world by refusing to join in their spiral of violence. [On the cross, Jesus] would love his enemies, turn the other cheek, go the second mile.*

This upside-down pattern so contradicts the thinking and practice of the world that it creates an “alternate kingdom,” an alternate reality, a counterculture among those who have been transformed by it. In this peaceable kingdom there is a reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, and wealth. In this new counterculture, Christians look at money as something to give away. They look at power as something to use strictly for service. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition, these normal marks of human life, are the opposite of the mindset of those who have understood and experienced the Cross. Christ creates a whole new order of life. Those who are shaped by the great reversal of the Cross no longer need self-justification through money, status, career, or pride of race and class. So the Cross creates a counterculture in which sex, money, and power cease to control us and are used in life-giving and community-building rather than destructive ways.
To understand why Jesus had to die it is important to remember both the result of the Cross (costly forgiveness of sins) and the pattern of the Cross (reversal of the world’s values). On the cross neither justice nor mercy loses out—both are fulfilled at once. Jesus’s death was necessary if God was going to take justice seriously and still love us. This same concern for both love and justice should mark all our relationships. We should never acquiesce in injustice. Jesus identified with the oppressed. Yet we should not try to overcome evil with evil. Jesus forgave his enemies and died for them.

Why then, did Jesus have to die? Even Jesus asked that question. In the Garden of Gethsemane he asked if there was any other way. There wasn’t. There isn’t. On the cross, in agony, he cried out the question, “Why!? Why was he being forsaken?” Why was it all necessary? The answer of the Bible is—for us.

The Story of the Cross

I have tried to explain what Jesus has done for us when he died. I’ve done so by distilling some principles. I can’t do the doctrine of the Cross full justice, however. I’ve heard that the great author Flannery O’Connor was once asked to put the meaning of one of her short stories “in a nutshell.” She responded tartly that, if she could have put the meaning into a nutshell, she wouldn’t have had to write the story. I’ve been trying to put the Cross of Jesus in a nutshell because I think it is an important exercise. Nevertheless, an exposition like this chapter of mine can’t convey all the life-changing power of the narrative arc itself.

The stories that always seem to move us most deeply are those in which someone faces irremediable loss or death in order to bring life to someone else. There is almost no popular movie, for example, that doesn’t make this its main theme. One of my personal favorites is Angels with Dirty Faces. James Cagney plays Rocky Sullivan, a celebrity criminal who is the idol of all the young juvenile delinquents in the city. He is about to go to the electric
chair. The night before his execution he is visited by his boyhood friend Jerry, played by Pat O’Brien, who is now a priest trying to save inner-city kids from a life of crime. Jerry makes a shocking request, but he says it is the only way that the kids he is working with can be turned away from the destructive path they’ve chosen.

_I want you to let them down. You see, you’ve been a hero to these kids, and hundreds of others, all through your life—and now you’re gonna be a glorified hero in death, and I want to prevent that, Rocky. They’ve got to despise your memory. They’ve got to be ashamed of you._

Rocky is incredulous.

_You asking me to pull an act, turn yellow, so those kids will think I’m no good. . . . You ask me to throw away the only thing I’ve got left. . . . You ask me to crawl on my belly—the last thing I do in life. . . . Nothing doing. You’re asking too much. . . . You want to help those kids, you got to think about some other way._

Jerry is calling Rocky to do the Great Reversal, the substitutionary sacrifice. If you hold on to your dignity, he says, they’ll die in shame. If you die in shame, relinquish your glory, the boys’ lives can be saved. It’s the only way to release his boys from their hero worship. Rocky refuses. But the next morning he walks to the execution chamber. Suddenly he begins to cry out for mercy in cowardly hysterics, and dies in humiliation, making the ultimate sacrifice. Movie viewers are always stunned. I should know because every time I watch it I am shaken and it makes me want to live my life differently. Such is the life-affecting power of story.

_Another great example of this kind of narrative is A Tale of Two Cities. Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton look very much alike, and they both love the same woman, Lucie Manette. Lucie chooses and marries Charles_
and they have a child. The setting of the story is the French Revolution, and Charles, who is a French aristocrat, is arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced to die by guillotine. At the end of the novel, Sydney, who is English, visits Charles the night before he is to be executed. He offers to exchange places with him. Charles refuses, but Sydney has him drugged and smuggles him away into a waiting carriage. Then Sydney takes Charles’s place. Charles and his family escape afterward to England.

That night in the prison, a young seamstress who is also condemned to die comes up to Sydney and begins to converse with him, thinking him to be Charles Darnay. When she realizes that it is not him, her eyes widen and she asks: “Are you dying for him?” Sydney responds: “And his wife and child. Hush! Yes.” The seamstress then confesses that she is terribly frightened and is not sure she will be able to face her death. She asks the brave stranger if he will hold her hand to the end. When the time comes, they go to death hand in hand. She finds herself composed, even comforted and hopeful, as long as she keeps her eyes on him.

The girl in the story was sinking under the weight of her trial. Her strength was giving out, but then she was smitten by the wonder of his substitutionary sacrifice, and it enabled her to face the ultimate test.

Moving? Yes, but the gospel goes one better. I always found these stories of sacrifice very emotionally affecting. I came away from them resolving to live more courageously and unselfishly. I never did follow through on my resolutions, however. The stories moved my emotions and pricked my conscience, but my heart’s basic patterns stayed intact. I was still driven by a need to prove myself to others, to win approval and acclaim, to control what people thought of me. As long as these fears and needs had such power over me, my intentions to change could not go very far.

The gospel, however, is not just a moving fictional story about someone else. It is a true story about us. We are actually in it. We are those delinquent
boys, and to save us Jesus gave up something infinitely greater than human celebrity. Also, Jesus has come to us in our prison and despite our unwillingness to be saved has taken our place. The seamstress was moved by a sacrifice that wasn't even for her. How much more can we be empowered by the discovery that Jesus has given himself for us, has changed places with us?

I can only say that observing these stories from the outside stirred me, but when I realized I was actually inside Jesus’s story (and he inside mine) it changed me. The fear and pride that captured my heart was finally dislodged. The fact that Jesus had to die for me humbled me out of my pride. The fact that Jesus was glad to die for me assured me out of my fear.

Notes


5 The charge that the Cross is “divine child abuse” seems to assume that the Father in heaven is the real God and Jesus is just some other kind of divine being who is being killed. This fails to do justice to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Christians believe that though the Father and the Son are distinct persons, they share the same being and substance, so that when Jesus bore the cost of forgiveness it was God doing so. For more on the Trinity see Chapter 13.

6 An illustration is in order. Imagine that you are walking along a river with a friend, and your friend suddenly says to you, “I want to show you how much I love you!” and with that he throws himself into the river and drowns. Would you say in response, “How he loved me!” No, of course not. You’d wonder about your friend’s mental state. But what if you were walking along a river with a friend and you fell into the river by accident, and you can’t swim. What if he dived in after you and pushed you to safety but was himself drawn under by the current and drowned. Then you would respond, “Behold, how he loved me!” The example of Jesus is a bad example if it is only an example. If there was no peril to save us from—if we were not lost apart from the ransom of his death—then the model of his sacrificial love is not moving and life-changing; it is crazy. Unless Jesus died as our substitute, he can’t die as a moving example of sacrificial love.

Reflect on the following questions.

- If Jesus did not die on the cross, and all we had were His teachings, what, if anything, would be different about Christianity? What would change about the way you follow Jesus?
Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. Keller points out the cross can appear as “bad news” to our culture today. What are some ways our culture looks at the cross as “bad news”? How is the cross foolishness to our current culture? How have you seen the cross be a stumbling block to belief for some?

Take a moment and write down your biggest fear and your greatest hope. How does the cross reshape those two things? How does the cross change the way we look at our fears and hopes?
How does the cross free you from the need to prove yourself to others? How does the cross free you from the need to prove yourself as “good enough” to walk intimately with God?

Keller writes, “Forgiveness means bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer do it, so you can reach out in love to seek your enemy’s renewal and change.” How can the cross help you in offering forgiveness to others, in seeking the renewal of those who harm you? To whom do you need to extend forgiveness now?
ENGAGEMENT

Think of 2-3 people in your life right now who need to hear the message of the cross. Write their names. Commit to praying for them during this study. Pray John 1:12-13 over them, that they would receive Jesus, believe in His name, and become a child of God.

Take some time to confess your sin before God. Ask God to search your heart, to reveal sin to which you may be blind. After some time in reflection, pray Psalm 51:1-17 out loud. Then read 1 John 1:9 as an assurance of the forgiveness God offers you through the cross of Christ.
GROUP GATHERING

Watch the video for Session 2.
As a group discuss the following.

- What is your favorite story (i.e., movie, book, personal story) of rescue? Why do you think stories of rescue are so prominent in our culture?

- Tom said the cross means we are not just to become better people, but new people. What is the difference between becoming a better person and becoming a new person? Why do you think this distinction might be important?

- Read Galatians 2:19-21. What do you think Paul means when he says, “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God...”? Why do you think Paul believes Jesus is worthy of our trust and faith?

- How does the cross enable us to have a new intimacy with God? How does the cross make it possible for us to live the life we were designed to live?
Break into smaller groups of 3-4 and discuss the following.

- In “The (True) Story of the Cross,” Tim Keller writes: “The fact that Jesus had to die for me humbled me out of my pride. The fact that Jesus was glad to die for me assured me out of my fear.” Are you in a season where you feel God needs to humble you out of your pride or assure you of your fear? Why?

- Divide the following passages and read them out loud (take your time, read them slowly, meditatively): 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Isaiah 53:4-9; Colossians 1:15-20.

- Spend time in prayer, thanking God for the cross. Thank God for the impact of the cross on your lives. Pray God would humble you out of your pride and assure you of your fears. Ask God for the message of the cross to dwell more richly in you, that “the life you live in the flesh you would live by faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you” (Galatians 2:20).

Gather back together.

As a group, have someone read Ephesians 3:15-19 as a benediction closing your time together.

PREPARE FOR SESSION 3

In preparation for the next Group Gathering, read and complete the Overview, Reflection, and Engagement sections of Session 3 (pages 37 - 51).
OVERVIEW

We all have received invitations to birthday parties, Christmas parties, wedding celebrations, or a myriad of social events. Invitations come in many shapes and sizes, but not all invitations are equal. The significance of an invitation is determined by the one who extends the invitation.

If the Creator of the world were to extend a personal invitation to you, certainly that would be an invitation impossible to ignore. In Matthew 11, this is precisely what is extended to you. The God who made and designed you is offering you a personal invitation.

In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus invites us to live the life we were originally designed to live before our lives were broken as a result of sin. He invites us to a life of wholeness, purpose, abundance, and joy. His invitation is to us, a people worn down by the weariness of our fragmented lives:

> Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)
This is an invitation to come to Jesus and take up His yoke. The metaphor Jesus uses, the yoke, is one far removed from our culture, but one Jesus would have known intimately. In His day, the yoke was a common tool used as oxen plowed fields. Each yoke was custom-made by a skilled carpenter for a specific team of oxen. As a carpenter in the town of Nazareth, Jesus would likely have crafted many yokes.

Taking the yoke, a farmer would put two oxen in it, side by side. He would put the mature, experienced ox on one side, and the younger, inexperienced ox on the other. In the yoke, the inexperienced ox would be apprenticed to the experienced ox. Inexperienced oxen were accustomed to unbridled selfish pursuits, and would go off the path whenever they saw green grass or a refreshing stream of water. In the yoke, the mature ox would gently guide the young ox back on course. In the course of time, the young ox would become just like the mature ox. The yoke was the means by which training and transformation occurred.

Jesus invites all of us to enter His yoke, to follow His lead, to learn from Him just as an apprentice learns from a master craftsman, or a resident doctor learns from an established physician. Entering Jesus’ yoke is both a decisive act of submission as well as a daily lifestyle of submission. Without being yoked to Jesus, we cannot live the life we long to live.

Surprisingly, Jesus tells us His yoke is “easy.” How can the One who tells us to love our enemies, go the extra mile, turn the other cheek, and take up our cross, claim His yoke is easy?

*The yoke of Jesus is an invitation to personal intimacy, not self-guided effort.* Jesus says to you, “Come to me...” These welcoming words show His invitation is one to a personal relationship, made possible by grace through faith in the atoning work of His cross. Jesus is not inviting you to embrace a long list of religious “do’s” and “don’ts,” or some external veneer of self-guided
religiosity, but rather an intimate and transforming personal relationship with Himself.

**The yoke of Jesus is an invitation to rest.** Jesus is not speaking of a life of ease, and certainly is not saying we need not worry about obeying His commands. Rather, He is contrasting His yoke with the yoke of other religious leaders. Jesus alone can offer rest to us because, as our Master, only He is gentle and humble of heart. He is not a cruel slave-master, but our gentle teacher, the one who loved us and gave Himself for us. Jesus is committed to us in a way no one else ever will be, and it makes His yoke a yoke of rest. When Jesus promises a life of rest, He is saying in His yoke, we, as His apprentices, will begin to discover the delightful life we were originally designed to live in the Garden of Eden.

**The yoke of Jesus is an invitation to community.** Although Jesus will walk with you personally, His yoke will always bring you near others who have yoked themselves to Him. Fellow disciples and the Church throughout history become living examples of how to best yoke ourselves to Jesus. This is why Paul told fellow Christians in Corinth, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” As we gather in community, we see those who have learned the yoke of Jesus well, and it helps shows us the way as we yoke ourselves to Jesus.

Few writers have captured the importance of the yoke like Dallas Willard. In the chapter “Discipleship: For Super Christians Only?” from *The Great Omission*, Willard lays out the significance of the yoke, the importance of discipleship, and why the yoke is not optional, but vital to the Christian life.

**Read the following excerpt.**
Discipleship: For Super Christians Only?
From *The Great Omission* by Dallas Willard

The word “DISCIPLE” occurs 269 times in the New Testament. “Christian” is found three times and was first introduced to refer precisely to disciples of Jesus—in a situation where it was no longer possible to regard them as a sect of the Jews (Acts 11:26). The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ.

But the point is not merely verbal. What is more important is that the kind of life we see in the earliest church is that of a special type of person. All of the assurances and benefits offered to humankind in the gospel evidently presuppose such a life and do not make realistic sense apart from it. The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy-duty model of the Christian—especially padded, textured, streamlined, and empowered for the fast lane on the straight and narrow way. He or she stands on the pages of the New Testament as the first level of basic transportation in the Kingdom of God.

Undiscipled Disciples

For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. Contemporary American churches in particular do not require following Christ in his example, spirit, and teachings as a condition of membership—either of entering into or continuing in fellowship of a denomination or local church. I would be glad to learn of any exception to this claim, but it would only serve to highlight its general validity and make the general rule more glaring. So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, *discipleship clearly is optional.*

That, of course, is no secret. The best of current literature on discipleship either states outright or assumes that the Christian may not be a disciple at all—even after a lifetime as a church member. A widely used book, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, presents the Christian life on three possible levels: the convert, the disciple, and the worker. There is a process for bringing persons to each level, it states. Evangelizing produces converts, establishing or “follow-up” produces disciples, and equipping produces workers. Disciples and workers are said to be able to renew the cycle by evangelizing, while only workers can make disciples through follow-up.

The picture of “church life” presented by this book conforms generally to American Christian practice. But does that model not make discipleship something entirely optional? Clearly it does, just as whether the disciple will become a “worker” is an option. Vast numbers of converts today thus exercise the options permitted by the message they hear: they choose not to become—or at least do not choose to become—disciples of Jesus Christ. Churches are filled with “undiscipled disciples,” as Jess Moody has called them. Of course there is in reality no such thing. Most problems in contemporary churches can be explained by the fact that members have never decided to follow Christ.

In this situation, little good results from insisting that Christ is *also supposed to be* Lord. To present his Lordship as an option leaves it squarely in the category of the special wheels, tires, and stereo equipment. You can do without it. And it is— alas!— far from clear what you would do with it. Obedience and training in obedience form no intelligible doctrinal or practical unity with the “salvation” presented in recent versions of the gospel.

**Great Omissions from the Great Commission**

A different model of life was instituted in the “Great Commission” Jesus left for his people. The first goal he set for the early church was to use his
all-encompassing power and authority to make disciples without regard to ethnic distinctions—from all “nations” (Matthew 28:19). That made clear a world-historical project and set aside his earlier strategic directive to go only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6). Having made disciples, these alone were to be baptized into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Given this twofold preparation, they were then to be taught to treasure and keep “all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). The Christian church of the first centuries resulted from following this plan for church growth—a result hard to improve upon.

But in place of Christ’s plan, historical drift has substituted “Make converts (to a particular ‘faith and practice’) and baptize them into church membership.” This causes two great omissions from the Great Commission to stand out. Most important, we start by omitting the making of disciples and enrolling people as Christ’s students, when we should let all else wait for that. Then we also omit, of necessity, the step of taking our converts through training that will bring them ever-increasingly to do what Jesus directed.

These two great omissions are connected in practice into one whole. Not having made our converts disciples, it is impossible for us to teach them how to live as Christ lived and taught (Luke 14:26). That was not a part of the package, not what they converted to. When confronted with the example and teachings of Christ, the response today is less one of rebellion or rejection than one of puzzlement: How do we relate to these? What have they to do with us? Isn’t this bait and switch?

**Discipleship Then**

When Jesus walked among humankind there was a certain simplicity to being his disciple. Primarily it meant to go with him, in an attitude of observation, study, obedience, and imitation. There were no correspondence courses. One knew what to do and what it would cost. Simon Peter
exclaimed, “Look, we have left everything and followed you” (Mark 10:28). Family and occupations were deserted for long periods to go with Jesus as he walked from place to place announcing, showing, and explaining the here-and-now governance or action of God. Disciples had to be with him to learn how to do what he did.

Imagine doing that today. How would family members, employers, and co-workers react to such abandonment? Probably they would conclude that we did not much care for them, or even for ourselves. Did not Zebedee think this as he watched his two sons desert the family business to keep company with Jesus (Mark 1:20)? Ask any father in a similar situation. So when Jesus observed that one must forsake the dearest things—family, “all that he hath,” and “his own life also” (Luke 14:26, 33)—insofar as that was necessary to accompany him, he stated a simple fact: it was the only possible doorway to discipleship.

**Discipleship Now**

Though costly, discipleship once had a very clear, straightforward meaning. The mechanics are not the same today. We cannot literally be with him in the same way as his first disciples could. But the priorities and intentions—the heart or inner attitudes—of disciples are forever the same. In the heart of a disciple there is a *desire*, and there is a *decision* or settled intent. Having come to some understanding of what it means, and thus having “counted up the costs,” the disciple of Christ desires above all else to be like him. Thus, “it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher” (Matthew 10:25). And moreover, “everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher” (Luke 6:40).

Given this desire, usually produced by the lives and words of those already in the Way, there is still a decision to be made: the decision to devote oneself to becoming like Christ. The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in his “faith and practice,” systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end. By these decisions and
actions, even today, one enrolls in Christ’s training, becomes his pupil or disciple. There is no other way. We must keep this in mind should we, as disciples, decide to make disciples.

In contrast, the nondisciple, whether inside or outside the church, has something “more important” to do or undertake than to become like Jesus Christ. He or she has “bought a piece of ground,” perhaps, or even five yoke of oxen, or has taken a spouse (Luke 14:18, 19). Such lame excuses only reveal that something on that dreary list of security, reputation, wealth, power, sensual indulgence, or mere distraction and numbness, still retains his or her ultimate allegiance. Or if someone has seen through these, he or she may not know the alternative—not know, especially, that it is possible to live under the care and governance of God, working and living with Him as Jesus did, always “seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

A mind cluttered by excuses may make a mystery of discipleship, or it may see it as something to be dreaded. But there is no mystery about desiring and intending to be like someone—that is a very common thing. And if we really do intend to be like Christ, that will be obvious to every thoughtful person around us, as well as to ourselves. Of course, attitudes that define the disciple cannot be realized today by leaving family and business to accompany Jesus on his travels about the countryside. But discipleship can be made concrete by actively learning how to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, walk the second mile with an oppressor—in general, living out the gracious inward transformations of faith, hope, and love. Such acts—carried out by the disciplined person with manifest grace, peace, and joy—make discipleship no less tangible and shocking today than were those desertions of long ago. Anyone who will enter into the Way can verify this, and he or she will at the same time prove that discipleship is far from dreadful.
The Cost of Nondiscipleship

In 1937 Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave the world his book *The Cost of Discipleship.* It was a masterful attack on “easy Christianity” or “cheap grace,” in the context of mid-twentieth-century Europe and America. But it did not succeed in setting aside—perhaps it even enforced—the view of discipleship as a costly spiritual excess, and only for those especially driven or called to it. It was right and good of Bonhoeffer to point out that one cannot be a disciple of Christ without forfeiting things normally sought in human life, and that one who pays little in the world’s coinage to bear his name has reason to wonder where he or she stands with God. But the cost of nondiscipleship is far greater—even when this life alone is considered—than the price paid to walk with Jesus, constantly learning from him.

Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, nondiscipleship costs you exactly that abundance of life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10). The cross-shaped yoke of Christ is after all an instrument of liberation and power to those who live in it with him and learn the meekness and lowliness of heart that brings rest to the soul.

“Follow Me. I’m Found!”

Leo Tolstoy wrote that “man’s whole life is a continual contradiction of what he knows to be his duty. In every department of life he acts in defiant opposition to the dictates of his conscience and his common sense.” In our age of bumper-sticker communications, some clever entrepreneur has devised a frame for the rear license plate that advises, “Don’t follow me. I’m lost.” It has had amazingly wide use, possibly because it touches with a little humor upon the universal failure referred to by Tolstoy. This failure causes a
pervasive and profound hopelessness and sense of worthlessness: a sense that I could never stand in my world as a salty, light-giving example, showing people the Way of Life. Jesus’s description of savorless salt sadly serves well to characterize how we feel about ourselves: “no longer good for anything, but [to be] thrown out and trampled under foot” (Matthew 5:13), and not even fit to mollify a manure pile (Luke 14:35).

A common saying expresses the same attitude: “Don’t do as I do, do as I say” (more laughs?). Jesus said of certain religious leaders—the scribes and Pharisees—of his day, “Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach” (Matthew 23:3). But that was no joke, and still isn’t. We must ask what he would say of us today. Have we not elevated this practice of the scribes and Pharisees into a first principle of the Christian life? Is that not the effect, whether intended or not, of making discipleship optional?

We are not speaking here of perfection, nor of earning God’s gift of life. Our concern is only with the manner of entering into that life. While none can merit salvation, or the fullness of life of which it is the root and natural part, all must act if it is to be theirs. By what actions of the heart, what desires and intentions, do we find access to life in Christ? Paul’s example instructs us. He could say, in almost one breath, both “I am not perfect” (Philippians 3:12) and “Do what I do” (Philippians 4:9). His shortcomings—whatever they were—lay back of him, but he lived forward into the future through his intention to attain to Christ. He was both intent upon being like Christ (Philippians 3:10–14) and confident of upholding grace for his intention. He could thus say to all, “Follow me. I’m found!” (“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”—1 Corinthians 11:1).

**Life’s Greatest Opportunity**

Dr. Rufus Jones has reflected in a recent book upon how little impact the twentieth-century evangelical church has had on societal problems. He
attributes the deficiency to a corresponding lack of concern for social justice on the part of conservatives. That, in turn, is traced to reactions against liberal theology, deriving from the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of past decades. These are points we must take very seriously.

Causal connections in society and history are hard to trace, but I believe this is an inadequate diagnosis. After all, the lack of concern for social justice, where that is evident, itself requires an explanation. And the current position of the church in our world may be better explained by *what liberals and conservatives have shared* than by how they differ. For different reasons, and with different emphases, they have agreed that discipleship to Christ is optional to membership in the Christian church. Thus, the very type of life that could change the course of human society—and upon occasion has done so—is excluded or at least omitted from the essential message of the church.

Concerned to enter that radiant life we each must ask, “Am I a disciple, or only a Christian by current standards?” Examination of our ultimate desires and intentions, reflected in the specific responses and choices that make up our lives, can show whether there are things we hold more important than being like him. If there are, then we are not yet his disciples. Being unwilling to follow him, our claim of trusting him must ring hollow. We could never credibly claim to trust a doctor, teacher, or auto mechanic whose directions we would not follow.

For those who lead or minister, there are yet graver questions: What authority or basis do I have to baptize people who have not been brought to a clear decision to be a disciple of Christ? Dare I tell people, as “believers” without discipleship, that they are at peace with God and God with them? Where can I find justification for such a message? Perhaps most important: Do I as a minister have the faith to undertake the work of disciple-making? Is my first aim to make disciples? Or do I just run an operation?
Nothing less than life in the steps of Christ is adequate to the human soul or the needs of our world. Any other offer fails to do justice to the drama of human redemption, deprives the hearer of life’s greatest opportunity, and abandons this present life to the evil powers of the age. The correct perspective is to see following Christ not only as the necessity it is, but as the fulfillment of the highest human possibilities and as life on the highest plane. It is to see, in Helmut Thielicke’s words, that “the Christian stands, not under the dictatorship of a legalistic ‘You ought,’ but in the magnetic field of Christian freedom, under the empowering of the ‘You may.’”

Notes

Credits and Permissions

Reflect on the following questions.

- Read Matthew 11:28-30. Why do you think Jesus chose the metaphor of the yoke in His invitation for you to follow Him? Why do you think the word “disciple” is the primary word used for followers of Jesus in the New Testament (i.e., instead of Christian, believer, etc.)?
Take a moment and define, as well as you can, the word “disciple.” Craft the definition as one that is tailor-made for you. Think about what it means to be a disciple in your primary vocation, your role in your family, friends, etc.

Willard defines a disciple as “…one who, intent upon becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in his ‘faith and practice,’ systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end.” How would you assess the way your life is ordered now? How have you rearranged your affairs to the end of following Jesus above all else? What are one or two major distractions that prevent you from rearranging your life to fully be a disciple of Jesus? Are there ways you can leverage these distractions so they can actually be places where you are actively seeking to be a disciple of Jesus?
Willard talks at great length about the cost of nondiscipleship, about how not rearranging our lives around following Jesus leads to a more impoverished life. He says, "Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil." What would you say is the cost of not yoking yourself to Jesus? Where in your life are you most discouraged, overwhelmed, or lacking peace? How could yoking yourself to Jesus offer you joy or hope in those circumstances?

Read John 14:15-21. Why do you think Jesus says that those who truly love Him will obey Him? What does Jesus explain is the role of “the Helper” (the Holy Spirit) in our discipleship and obedience to Him?
What practices have you encountered that have best helped you walk in discipleship to Jesus? Prayer? Corporate worship? Journaling? Serving others? What activities (these or others) lead you to feel closest to God?

ENAGEMENT

Spend 30 minutes sometime this week engaging with God through one of the practices you listed above. Pray, sing, journal - practice whatever draws you into the presence of God, that you may experience the intimate relationship to which God invites you.

Rest. In celebration of the fact that Jesus invites us into His yoke of rest, take some time this week to do whatever is most restful to you. Take a nap, pick up a book, drink some coffee on your patio, carve out time for whatever gives you rest. If you are married with kids, make sure your spouse has space to do this.
Watch the video for Session 3.
As a group discuss the following.

- What is the most memorable invitation you have received? Or what was the last invitation you received that caused you to reorder your family schedule to make sure you could attend?

- Tom said that human-centered religion can be a suffocating experience. When has religion been a suffocating experience for you? Why do you think religion often has a reputation of producing people that are stuffy and overbearing?

- Read Matthew 11:28-30. How can Jesus simultaneously command us to do hard things (i.e., love your enemies, turn the other cheek), and yet also say His yoke is easy and His burden is light? What do you think Jesus means when He says His yoke is easy and His burden is light?
Why do you think Jesus emphasized “rest” as something He invites us into? How has Jesus been a source of “rest” for you personally?

**Break into smaller groups of 3-4 and discuss the following, concluding with prayer.**

- Dallas Willard writes: “The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christ-like and so dwelling in his ‘faith and practice,’ systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end.” After doing your homework and hearing Tom speak on the “yoke,” what is one area of your life you feel needs to be rearranged to follow Christ better? Or what is one area you sense needs growth in your discipleship to Jesus?

- Pray for what each person shared. Pray for one another that God would strengthen each of you to rearrange your life around the yoke of Christ, and know the easy yoke of Christ, that you may have rest.

**PREPARE FOR SESSION 4**

In preparation for the next Group Gathering, read and complete the **Overview**, **Reflection**, and **Engagement** sections of Session 4 (pages 55 - 63).
OVERVIEW

Let’s be honest, the Bible can be a difficult book. There are parts we do not understand, parts we do not particularly like, and frankly, parts that are just hard to believe. As a result, we all approach this book in different ways.

Maybe you do not believe this is God’s Word, (or rather) that the Bible is just another book. Maybe you do believe that this is God’s Word, but in reality you pick and choose what parts of the Bible are important to you. Or maybe this book really has changed everything for you, and it is your life and your authority.

However we see the Bible, there is no doubt about what the Bible itself claims to be—God Himself speaking to us. If there is a God who made us, and if He really does speak to us—what could be more important? The One who loves us, who knows best how our world should work, and who knows exactly what He expects from His creation—He speaks to us! God is speaking, but are we listening?

As we pursue the life we long to live, the Bible is absolutely essential. But have you ever asked yourself, “What is this book, really?”
The Bible has a long history, written over a period of two millennia, by dozens of authors, 66 individual books compiled into one. Today, there are more copies in more languages than any other book in history, which means there’s something significant here. Perhaps the best answer to “What is the Bible?” can be found in the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16:

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

The words of Scripture have been “breathed out by God,” inspired by Him. While written by human authors, the book’s true author is God Himself - His message, His words, His love on paper, for us. If these are God’s words to us, surely they stand in authority over us.

And this is where many of us struggle. After all, there is much in the Bible that our culture finds difficult to believe. This is because we often begin with the outskirts of the Bible, rather than the center. For example, some reject the Bible because they do not like its teaching on sexual ethics. Because they do not like its teaching on sex, they do not believe in Jesus. However, the Bible is not primarily a book about sexual ethics (even if it does speak to that subject). The Bible is about Jesus. Judge Him first, and then consider its teaching on sexual ethics.

Tim Keller makes the same point: “If Jesus is the Son of God, then we have to take his teaching seriously, including his confidence in the authority of the Bible. If he is not who he says he is, why should we care about what the Bible says about anythings else.”

If Jesus really has power over the grave, then He alone knows what will bring us life. So before you let the hard parts of the Bible drag you down, first consider the center of the Bible, the story of Jesus, who claims to come to

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save us, to break the power of death, and bring us an abundant life, the life we long to live.

This is why the Church has always gathered around this book, why the Bible has always held a central authoritative role in what Christians believe and practice. The Church has always understood the Bible as more than just good advice, but as God’s Word, His Story to us of who we are and what we are meant for.

**The Bible leads us to life.** The Bible is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness…” This book rebukes us, tells us when we are on the wrong path. It corrects us, showing us the way back. As individual believers and as a community, we are called to know and teach this book, so that it can make us “complete…” The Bibles make us complete by showing us Jesus, showing us ourselves, and showing us the better way of life, through faith in the One who died for us on the cross.

**The Bible is vital in truly knowing God.** Many people say many things about God. But what is true? The only way to truly know God is for Him to have spoken, and for Him to have spoken in a way that we cannot change, correct, or disregard. In the Bible, we have God’s unalterable word. We have to wrestle with it. We have to take all of it in, what troubles us and what we love, so that we have a complete picture of who God truly is. Without the whole of the Bible, we are left with a God we make in our image. If we simply pick and choose what parts of the Bible we will take seriously, then all we are doing is making a God who looks like us.

**The Bible is vital to truly encourage others.** How do you handle that person who endlessly frustrates you? What do you say to the person who struggles with doubt? What do you tell the person who is suffering? The Bible is full of what God really cares about, how God has interacted with this world, and as such the Bible helps us live in true community. It helps us see what
God would have us pray for, how we can comfort others, and how we help encourage others to faith in Christ.

So come to this book looking for the God who rescues on every page. That is the story this book tells through His life, death, and resurrection. If we come to Him in faith and repentance, we are given forgiveness and life. This is the message. This is God’s Word for you. In these words we discover the life we long to live.

It might surprise you that we are having you read the introduction to a children’s Bible, but frankly, there is no better explanation of what the Bible is and how we should read it than what Sally Lloyd-Jones has offered in the following pages. It may have been written for children, but it’s something we all need to hear.

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**Read the following excerpt.**

**The Story and The Song**

*From The Jesus Storybook Bible* by Sally Lloyd-Jones

Introduction from Psalm 19 and Hebrews 1

*The Heavens are singing*

*about how great God is;*

*and the skies are shouting it out,*

*“See what God has made!”*

*Day after day…*

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^Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 12-17.
Night after night…
They are speaking to us.
Psalm 19:1-2 (paraphrase)

God wrote, “I love you” – he wrote it in the sky, and on the earth, and under the sea. He wrote his message everywhere! Because God created everything in his world to reflect him like a mirror – to show us what he is like, to help us know him, to make our hearts sing.

The way a kitten chases her tail. The way red poppies grow wild. The way a dolphin swims.

And God put it into words, too, and wrote it in a book called “the Bible.”

Now, some people think the Bible is a book of rules, telling you what you should and shouldn’t do. The Bible certainly does have some rules in it. They show you how life works best. But the Bible isn’t mainly about you and what you should be doing. It’s about God and what he has done.

Other people think the Bible is a book of heroes, showing you people you should copy. The Bible does have some heroes in it, but (as you’ll soon find out) most of the people in the Bible aren’t heroes at all. They make some big mistakes (sometimes on purpose). They get afraid and run away. At times they are downright mean.

No, the Bible isn’t a book of rules, or a book of heroes. The Bible is most of all a Story. It’s an adventure story about a young Hero who comes from a far country to win back his lost treasure. It’s a love story about a brave Prince who leaves his palace, his throne – everything – to rescue the one he loves. It’s like the most wonderful of fairy tales that has come true in real life!

You see, the best thing about this Story is – it’s true.

There are lots of stories in the Bible, but all the stories are telling one Big Story. The Story of how God loves his children and comes to rescue them.
It takes the whole Bible to tell this Story. And at the center of the Story, there is a baby. Every Story in the Bible whispers his name. He is like the missing piece in a puzzle – a piece that makes all the other pieces fit together, and suddenly you can see a beautiful picture.

And this is no ordinary baby. This is the Child upon whom everything would depend. This is the Child who would one day – but wait. Our story starts where all good stories start. Right at the very beginning. . .

Reflect on the following questions.

- There are many reasons that prevent us from finding the Scriptures to be a source of life. After all, the Bible is at times difficult to understand, was written to a different cultural setting, and has some things that may initially offend us. Take a moment and briefly consider what makes it difficult for you to engage with the Bible? What do you think keeps you from finding the Bible as a life-giving source of God’s Word?
One major objection to the Bible is that it is “culturally regressive.” Many in our culture read the Bible and find elements backward and oppressive. In response to these objections, Tim Keller writes, “To reject the Bible as regressive is to assume that you have now arrived at the ultimate historic moment, from which all that is regressive and progressive can be discerned. That belief is surely as narrow and exclusive as the views in the Bible you regard as offensive.” What are some things our culture finds “regressive” in the Bible? Personally, what does the Bible say that you struggle to believe? How does the quote above apply to what you struggle to believe in the Bible?

Another reason the Bible is often hard to understand is because we can easily lose sight of the “big picture” of the Bible. In The Jesus Storybook Bible, Sally Lloyd-Jones writes, “...The Bible isn’t mainly about you and what you should be doing. It’s about God and what He has done.” In light of this quote, how might we change the way we read the Bible? What is the difference between reading the Bible as a book “mainly about you and what you should be doing” as opposed to a book “about God and what He has done”?

Read Hebrews 4:11-13, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Psalm 119:25-32, Psalm 119:105-112. What do these passages tell us about the Bible? In light of these passages, why should the Bible play such a significant role in our lives?
EN G A G E M E N T

- For a long time, Christians (as well as Jews before the New Testament) memorized Scripture because they did not personally own a copy. Pick one of your favorite passages in the Bible (4-7 verses) and memorize it this week, meditating on it slowly each day (i.e., John 3:16-21, Colossians 1:15-20, Psalm 1, Psalm 23). Reflect on it, considering what God may be saying to you through it.

- Satan tempted Jesus during his 40-day fast in the wilderness to turn stones into bread. But Jesus resisted, saying, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). This week, if you are physically able, choose a mealtime to engage in a fast. Why fast? “A fast is the self-denial of normal necessities in order to intentionally attend to God in prayer. Bringing attachments and cravings to the surface opens a place for prayer. This physical awareness of emptiness is a reminder to turn to Jesus who alone can satisfy.” If you are unable to fast from food, choose something else to fast from during a space this week (i.e., TV, internet, whatever can open up space for prayer). During your fast, spend time reading Scripture and praying, asking God that you would be a person who does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

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GROUP GATHERING

Watch the video for Session 4.
As a group discuss the following.

- When you hear the word “Bible,” what is the first thing that comes to your mind? What do you think our culture primarily associates with the word “Bible”?

- Tom mentioned that the Bible is not just something we read...the Bible reads us. What is Tom saying by this? Why do you think it might be important to let the Bible read us?

- **Read 2 Timothy 3:14-17.** Based on these verses, what should be the role of the Bible in the life of a Christian? Why do you think Paul says the Bible is ultimately to make Christians “complete”?

- What do you find troubling about the Bible? What parts of the Bible are most difficult for you to believe? What do you think Paul’s advice would be to us (based on 2 Timothy 3:14-17) about how to handle what we find difficult about the Bible?
As a group spend some time in prayer.

- Spend some time sharing about the area in which you feel you most need God’s direction. If you could choose one area where God would speak directly to you, what would it be? As others are sharing, if a Scripture comes to mind that might encourage them, read it with them.

- Spend some time praying for one another, for God’s direction in these areas, and that you would allow God to use His Scriptures to guide, direct, and lead you.

**PREPARE FOR SESSION 5**

In preparation for the next Group Gathering, read and complete the **Overview**, **Reflection**, and **Engagement** sections of Session 5 (pages 67 - 88).
OVERVIEW

Whether you grew up going to church or not, chances are you have an opinion about the church. Whatever that opinion is, it is most likely a mixture of some truth and some myth. Our experiences shape us in profound ways, and because the church is made up of sinful people in a broken world, some of our experiences with church are far from perfect. But if you dig into what the Bible says about the church, you will see that if you want to know and belong to Jesus, you must know and belong to His church.

In the Bible, the church is called Jesus’ home (Ephesians 2:19-22), Jesus’ family (Hebrews 2:10-13), and Jesus’ bride (Revelation 21:9). But perhaps the most illustrative description of the church comes in Ephesians 1:21-22, where the church is described as Jesus’ own body:

> [God] put all things under Christ’s feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Eugene Peterson, in his translation of the Bible called The Message, puts the passage this way:
[Christ] is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ’s body, in which He speaks and acts, by which He fills everything with His presence.\footnote{Eugene Peterson, \textit{The Message} (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1993).}

To know Jesus in a real and meaningful way, one must know His church. This is because Jesus fills the church to the brim with His presence, His character, and His priorities. Jesus’ presence is to so transform the people who make up the church that the church can be described as Jesus’ body: the tangible, living, breathing, moving, and working expression of Jesus to the world.

However, this is where many of us may struggle. If the church is the body of Christ, why is it full of so much division? Why has the church at times been a source of great injustice, racism, and oppression? How could anyone still maintain the priority and importance of the church in light of such realities?

Before we discard the church, we must remember something Jesus said as He was inviting people to follow Him. In one instance, when people were questioning why Jesus would hang around morally suspect people, Jesus responded by saying, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32).

If what Jesus is saying is true, this means that the church will often be more of a hospital for sinners than a museum for saints. The church is the place for the broken, the needy, those who need the good news of a great healer. While this never excuses the faults of the church, it certainly explains them. And more than anything, it shows the great importance for the church as the only place that will truly welcome anyone—the sick, the broken, the needy—with the good news of the Gospel. Ultimately then, there are three inescapable realities of the church.
You need the church. By yourself, you are not able to properly follow Jesus. You need others praying for you, encouraging you, and at times, even calling you away from sin into new life. We all have blind spots, and without a community surrounding us with encouragement, grace, and truth, we can never grow into the holy, complete people God ultimately wants us to be. This is why Paul, in Ephesians 4:11-13, says that those around us in the church are gifted by God so that we can grow into “the fullness of Christ.” Yes, the church will at times be a frustrating place, but in those moments of frustration, God is healing sinners and forming saints into the fullness of Christ.

The church needs you. God has made you unique, and others around you need your encouragement, your humor, your prayers, and your insight. Together, as the church pours into you and you pour into the church, we grow into Christlikeness. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:15-16:

...Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

The world needs the church. In the church, our identity is transformed from sick sinners in search of healing into the very body of Christ. Our transformed identity is then practiced in the way we interact with the world throughout the week. It is practiced in the way we love our families, even when such love is difficult. It is practiced in the way we seek to serve our neighbors, even if they do not share our faith. It is practiced in the way we work, not simply for compensation or self-promotion, but for the good of the community and to God’s glory. The church, just like Jesus, models to the world a brand new way to be human, to live the life God designed for us, to flourish. In this sense, the church truly becomes the hope of the world.
In his chapter “Why Church?”, Tom Nelson critiques the misguided ways we often look at church, while also laying down the foundation of what the church truly is, and what it could be.

**Reflection**

Read the following excerpt.

**Chapter 1: Why Church?**

From *Ekklesia* by Tom Nelson

"Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)"

Robert Lewis describes an encounter that rocked his world. He writes:

"Recently I conducted an informal poll at a suburban mall near where I live in Little Rock, Arkansas. The question was simple: What impact is the church having on the community? When I posed that question to a teenager, his answer was direct and penetrating. “The church,” he said, “is crap.”"

Reading such a crass and provocative description of the church hits us hard. It truly makes us uncomfortable. In our discomfort, we might be quick to dismiss a teenager’s unscripted comment or quick to be defensive about it. Perhaps stinging memories of a hurtful local church experience might cause

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us to resonate with this teenager’s sentiment. Maybe some of us even feel like giving the teen a silent, yet exuberant, high-five.

It is fair to say that the contemporary culture’s view of the church is less than stellar—and that poses a challenge for each one of us who identify with the church. I’d like to suggest, though, that the greatest challenge before us is not the broader cultural view of the church, but rather how we who claim to be followers of Jesus view the church. In our imaginative mind’s eye, what do we see when we picture the church?

**Four Common Pictures of the Church**

Let me suggest four common pictures, or metaphors, that often pop into our minds when we are confronted with the word *church*.

**The Church as a Gas Station**

We often view the church as a spiritual gas station, as a place we cruise into once a week when our tanks are getting low. For us, the church is primarily a place to be filled up. A place to be filled with a good sermon, some new Bible information, and the life-sustaining additives of encouragement, warm feelings, and inspiration. In my spiritual community on a Sunday morning, a mountain of donut holes looms near the coffee, conveniently accessible for the empty stomachs that accompany empty souls. Underneath our nicely spoken platitudes, the church is really all about filling us up.

**The Church as a Movie Theater**

Often we see the church as a movie theater we visit to escape our problems for a while and to be entertained. My wife Liz and I really enjoy our date nights at the theater. For me, comfortable seats, excellent surround sound, and a good view—topped off with an overflowing bucket of buttered popcorn—makes for an excellent movie experience. When all this comes together in a convenient package, both of us leave the theater feeling great, often giving our night out a five-star rating.
Much of the time we view the church in the same way. It’s primarily a place where we’re entertained, a place we go to forget about our problems for a while and escape the incessant demands and hardships of a dog-eat-dog world. We expect, when pulling into the parking lot, that an enthralling experience awaits us. Warm, friendly staff, excellent facilities, fun and exciting children’s programs, an inspiring message, top-notch musical performances, and of course, comfortable chairs or pews.

As consumers of entertainment, we morph on the way home from church into sophisticated critics. Putting on the demeanor of a Roger Ebert, we gladly give the music, the message, and the children’s programs anywhere from a one to five-star rating. Oh, we might serve in some capacity if our guilt becomes intolerably persistent, and we may even toss in money as the offering plate goes by, but for all practical purposes, the church is about entertaining me.

**The Church as a Drug Store**

Many times we see the church as a drug store, dispensing just the right prescription or therapy that will somehow fix us. The church is where we go when our pain reaches a tipping point. Doing church means going to a place that gives us something to relieve the deep and gnawing pain that simply will not go away. The pain may emanate from a dysfunctional marriage, the haunting loneliness of singleness, a traumatic childhood, a conflict-ridden work environment, or a soul-suffocating addiction. In the depths of our self-absorbed beings, we want to escape our pain, to feel good feelings, and to be pleased.

The insightful sociologist Philip Reiff makes a strong case for the continuing pervasive influence of twentieth century psychotherapist Sigmund Freud. He highlights the massive cultural shift in how we now view faith primarily through a therapeutic lens. Reiff puts it plainly, “Religious man was born to be saved; psychological man is born to be pleased.” Perhaps more than
ever, a vast majority of us view the church from the therapeutic vantage point of psychological man. We have convinced our narcissistic selves that we were born into this world first and foremost to be pleased. The church is about fixing me.

**The Church as a Big Box Retailer**

As religious consumers, we also see the church as a kind of Wal-Mart or Super Target store. A place we go that is safe and clean. A place that has everything we want under one roof, well organized and easily accessible, placed conveniently on a lower shelf. What’s a good church? One that offers great service at a low price, all in one stop! The church is really about serving me—and if I happen to have children, serving them with excellent programming.

Each of us sees the church in rather distorted textures and hues. These ways of seeing the church are not all bad, for there is some truth in every one of them. But in adopting one of these common ways of viewing the local church, have we bought into a caricature of the real thing?

More importantly, what are the unintended consequences of seeing the church as a kind of spiritual gas station, or a theater, or a drug store, or a Target focused primarily on my individual wants and needs? May I suggest there are many?

**The New Revolutionaries**

One of the most disturbing consequences of our distorted view of the church is evidenced in a growing movement of thought that encourages seeing true spirituality through an individual lens, as a privatized Christianity virtually divorced from communal faith, severed from local church life.

In a recent book, influential evangelical researcher George Barna not only diagnoses and documents what he describes as a major cultural shift to a more individual faith separated from local church involvement, but he
also seems to be advocating it. In a listing of what he describes as “The Affirmations of a Revolutionary,” Barna declares, “I am not called to attend or join a church. I am called to be the church.”

Rather than affirming what Christians have believed throughout the centuries, that commitment to local church life is essential for vibrant, maturing Christian faith, George Barna presents and promotes a radically different view—that the local church is in essence a kind of unwieldy and encumbered obstacle to dynamic Christian belief. In one of his widely dispersed updates, George Barna writes:

…a much larger segment of Americans are currently leaving churches precisely because they want more of God in their life but cannot get what they need from a local church. They have decided to get serious about their faith by piecing together a more robust faith experience. Instead of going to church, they have chosen to be the Church…

For Barna, this paradigm shift is viewed as a good thing, even a God-thing, the dawning of a new great spiritual awakening, not unlike the first or second great awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But is it really? How are we, as biblically informed followers of Christ, to respond to individualized spirituality? Are we to embrace the advocates of this new revolution, affirming their cutting-edge insight, or should we take pause and confront their misguided zeal? Are we to fall in line with this revolution or should we chart a different course?

Having been a part of local church life for many years, both as a parishioner and as a pastor, I have experienced firsthand the very real disappointment when a congregation falls woefully short of what it has been designed to be and do. The tapestry of any local church is woven with the bare and often frayed threads of sinful and fallen humanity. In my pastoral ministry, I have observed the local church in both the best of times and the worst of times. I
have experienced the exhilaration of a local congregation’s finest hour as well as the exhaustion of its most desperate hour.

When the church is not all it should be, do we have the freedom to abandon it for a new revolutionary spirituality? Are we called only to “be the church,” and not called to be a part of a local church?

I respect George Barna as a sincere Christian, but I disagree with his viewpoint. In fact, I believe his position is misguided and theologically indefensible. Abandoning the centrality of the local church inevitably brings with it a myriad of both short-term and long-term cultural consequences. Our greatest challenge is not the broader post-Christian culture’s perceptions, misperceptions, or misguided notions. Rather it is our own gaping theological ignorance. Indeed, we have met the enemy and he is us.5

In spite of so much noisy confusion abounding around the subject of the church these days, the timeless words of seventeenth-century Blaise Pascal arrest my mind and grip my heart. Pascal observed, “Truth is so obscured nowadays and lies so well established that unless we love the truth we shall never recognize it.”6

For those who love Christ and truth at the dawning of the twenty-first century, it is time to dust the cobwebs off our theology. The time is ripe to cast off our muddled thinking. Rather than checking out, we must rediscover the local church as it was designed to be. Maybe now is the opportune time to move the local church from the margins of culture to its mainstream.

So where do we begin? How about with Jesus’ own words, found in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel? But before we dive into Jesus’ teaching, we must first set the larger contextual backdrop, the Bible’s big storyline.
**God’s Big Story**

When we step back and look at God’s big story recorded in the Bible, we observe that from the first book, Genesis, to the last book, Revelation, there is a developing and coherent theme. We discover a God who created the world, a world swept up in a vast cosmic rebellion, a world that its loving Creator did not abandon and will one day restore in new creation brilliance, splendor, and perfection.

In the Old Testament, we learn that the one true Creator God first conceived and then revealed to His fallen crown of creation—man—a plan to redeem the world. Set against the backdrop of a creation groaning under the curse of death and decay (Rom 8:18-25), God called out a man named Abram and covenanted with him that all the nations of the world would one day be blessed through him (Gen 12:1-3). In this covenant arrangement, redeemed people were called out not only to relationship with God, but also to become a redemptive community through which all the nations of the world would one day be blessed. The creation of a redeemed and redemptive community is at the very heart of the biblical storyline.

The entire Old Testament tells the story of a loving, holy, and sovereign Triune God working His redemptive plan through His redemptive community. As God’s big story is unveiled, the narrative focal point becomes a person who would come to earth, an anointed one, the Messiah (Mic 5:2-5; Isa 53). He would usher in God’s kingdom reign and make possible the restoration of a fallen people and a fallen world (2 Sam 7:16).

After four hundred years of dramatic silence following the closing of the Old Testament, the curtain of the New Testament is now drawn open. Through the miraculous events surrounding His virgin birth, Jesus of Nazareth bursts on the scene. The gospel writer Matthew connects the Old Testament prophetic dots highlighting Jesus’ Messianic person and message. Rabbi Jesus’ good news message, centered in and around His ushering in a grand
and glorious kingdom, was simple and to the point. “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand” (Matt 4:17). By the time we get to chapter sixteen of Matthew’s gospel, we encounter a watershed revelation.

**The Great Confession**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church [Gk. ekklesia], and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. (Mt 16:13-20)

In Matthew chapter sixteen, the Greek word ekklesia (translated as church in English) first appears in the New Testament. The context points to a great confession, a declaration regarding the true identity of Jesus. We must not miss that this narrative account begins with Jesus asking his disciples two questions. Most likely, these questions were prompted by the many pagan god shrines at Caesarea Philippi, which were located near where they walked. Remember that school was always in session for Rabbi Jesus, and here he gives his disciples a spontaneous pop quiz.

First, Jesus asks his disciples the warm-up question. “Who do people say that I am?” Several eager-beaver disciples enthusiastically blurt out, “Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” I’m guessing the disciples were feeling pretty good about themselves at this point, experiencing a moment of inflated congratulations perhaps. But then Jesus asks a second, more
emphatic, question. In verse 15, Jesus literally says, “You! Who do you say that I am?”

Put on the spot, I imagine there was a sudden and dreadful kind of dead-air, pin-drop silence. Churning stomachs suddenly crammed their way into the disciples’ throats. Thankfully, Peter musters up his courage and shatters the uncomfortable silence. He declares to Jesus, “You are the Christ (the anointed one, Messiah), the son of the Living God.” And Jesus basically responds to Peter, and I’m paraphrasing, You’ve got it Peter! But before you get heady about it, let Me say plainly you didn’t get that one on your own. God revealed that to you!

Clarity about Jesus’ identity is foundational to grasping what the church is and what it is designed to be in the world. After all, it is not our church, it is Christ’s church. If we are foggy about Jesus’ identity, we will be in the dark about the nature and mission of the church. If we don’t have a clear grasp on just who Jesus is, then we will not see His church rightly.

Jesus’ foundational and definitive teaching on the church is found here in Matthew 16:18-19. Let’s take a closer look at these two very important verses of Holy Scripture.

**This Rock**

Immediately following Peter’s great confession regarding his Rabbi’s true and exclusive identity, Jesus responds to Peter, “And I also say to you, that you are Peter and upon this rock, I will build my church.” So many polarizing arguments have arisen over the meaning and significance of “the rock” language that we often miss the main thrust of what Jesus is saying. Is the rock a reference to Peter’s person or Peter’s confession? Both interpretations are biblically plausible and defensible.⁹

But I don’t believe this text should be taken as endorsing some kind of exclusive apostolic succession through the line of Peter, residing perpetually
in Rome. Nor should it be used to minimize Peter’s important role in being a foundational pillar in Christ’s new community. No matter how we interpret these words of Jesus, we can be confident that the main emphasis here is not on Peter, but on Jesus building His church.

**My Church**

Jesus says, “I will build my church.” The Greek word for church here is _ekklesia_. _Ekklesia_ was used widely in extra-biblical literature of the day to describe a public gathering, an assembly of people summoned by a herald or town crier. Here in Matthew chapter sixteen, Jesus employs this word and attaches to it a special significance: God’s redemptive community. New Testament scholar D. A. Carson notes, “Etymologically it [ _ekklesia_ ] springs from the verb _ekkaleo_ (“call out from”) and refers to those who are “called out”; but usage is far more important than etymology in determining meaning.”

_Ekklesia_ is used frequently in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament used by people in the time of Jesus—to describe “the assembling of Israel before God to hear the reading of the law, confess their sins, express repentance and renew the covenant.” Therefore, when Peter acknowledges Jesus as Messiah, it is fitting that Jesus responds by saying that he will build his ekklesia, his people. Carson quotes Ladd at this point who notes, “Jesus’ announcement of his purpose to build his ekklesia suggests... that the fellowship established by Jesus stands in direct continuity with the Old Testament Israel.” Jesus as God’s Messiah is establishing his messianic community, a community of called-out ones, called out by Jesus Himself.

**The Gates**

Notice how Jesus sets His new redemptive community in the context of the entire biblical storyline of a very real cosmic conspiracy and ongoing invisible war. Jesus boldly states, “I will build My church and the gates of hell will not overpower it.” Rabbi Jesus’ utilization of the word gates here is
significant. The imagery of gates might suggest the church being birthed in a defensive posture, a circle-the-wagons kind of fortification. But in Jesus’ mind, the church is placed in an offensive posture, strategically geared and supernaturally empowered to redeem the lost territory occupied by a rival and counterfeit kingdom.

The church is on the march with a mission that even the strong gates or authorities of the evil one cannot thwart. We learn in the gospels and the entire New Testament that the church utilizes special weapons in this mission of redemption (2 Cor 10:3-5). We also learn that the church’s understanding of power is paradoxically embodied not in military or physical might, but in weakness and humility (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Jesus infuses his new redemptive enterprise—the church—with a quiet confidence in accomplishing its mission to live and function as a community in the world. Jesus’ called-out ones have the enduring assurance that, at the end of the day, they will not be defeated by the hosts of darkness arrayed against them. The cross of Christ leaves no doubt. The kingdom of divine goodness and love ushered in by Jesus will ultimately prevail. His church has been given the checkered flag of victory. Though it is the target of hell’s greatest fury and in for the fight of its life, the church—Jesus declares—will overcome. Not only will his called-out ones prevail, they will be entrusted with the keys of the kingdom.

The Keys
Jesus continues his response to Peter’s confession by saying, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Like the imagery of gates, the imagery of keys is important for us to grasp. What do keys do? They give us access.

I can still remember that moment when the salesman placed a set of shiny new keys in my hand. I had just purchased—a glistening red Toyota Celica two-door coupe. I opened the
door ever so gently and lowered myself in, allowing the intoxicating smell of newness to drift over me. I was convinced that heaven had come down to earth. With adrenaline pumping and my heart practically leaping out of my chest, I placed the keys in the ignition. I took a breath and turned the key. The most beautiful sound echoed from under the hood. My new car purred like a kitten. The weather was perfect when I proudly cruised home in my long-awaited trophy. Having my own set of car keys opened up a whole new world for me.

Whether it is an automobile or a house, possessing the keys makes a big difference. The right keys make possible unlocking, entering, and operating, with all the security and benefits possession affords. Keys allow us to exercise proper dominion. The primary example of this proper dominion is the dominion humankind was given as the crown of creation to steward the rest of the created world (Gen 1:26-28).

By utilizing the imagery of keys, Jesus reminds His called-out ones, the church, that the key holders alone have access. Jesus’ disciples are given amazing access to the kingdom of God—that is, the reign of the Triune God in this world. In Jesus’ “already but not fully yet” kingdom, His church is equipped to fulfill its original creation calling, to exercise delegated dominion on behalf of the Triune God. His church, having been given the keys of the kingdom, helps facilitate God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Foundational to Jesus’ teaching is that the church is not to be perceived as an obstacle to true spirituality, but as essential in accessing it. Rather than minimizing, marginalizing, or maligning the local church, we must once again see it on center stage of the unfolding redemptive drama of God’s kingdom reign. If truly grasped, this bedrock truth radically changes the way we view the church and how we understand true spirituality. It reshapes our priorities and the ordering of our loves. Craig Van Gelder, a refreshing voice against the backdrop of so much sloppy thinking about the church, speaks with
a welcome, bottom-line clarity. “This great redemptive drama places the church center stage, but it does so in relationship to the larger framework of God’s redemptive reign.”

If the church (and we will see in the chapters ahead that the local church is clearly the primary focus of the New Testament) is at the center stage of God’s redemptive plan and reign, why are we in our day so quick to marginalize it? If the church is the primary vehicle for the proclamation and incarnation of the gospel, why are we silencing it? Why are we beginning to cast it off as some kind of antiquated obstacle to enlightened privatized spirituality, rather than seeing it as essential to true biblical Christianity?

The Holy Scriptures present Jesus’ called-out ones, His ekklesia, as the heartthrob of God and the hope of the world. Should we view the church as anything less? We do not need a misguided revolution, but rather a theologically informed reformation. As a spiritually hungry culture, we need to once again imagine what the church should and can be in our needy world. And we must reconstruct a compelling apologetic for the vital importance of the local church.

The Apostle Peter reminds us of our stewardship. “But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet 3:15).

Even as we look to Peter’s inspired words as a call to properly defend our Christian faith, we often miss the broader context of these words. Our apologetic task is not centered in individual faith, but within the context of the family and local church life. An integral apologetic for the Christian faith, the family, and the local church cannot and must not be separated.

Paul Tournier has wisely noted, “There are two things we cannot do alone… one is to be married and the other is be a Christian.” Philip Yancey echoes a
similar refrain. “Christianity is not a purely intellectual, internal faith; it can only be lived in community.”19 An early church father put it this way, “He cannot have God for His father who does not have the church for his mother.”

So what’s the big deal about the church? Throughout the history of our Christian faith, the church both universal and local has been understood as vitally crucial in God’s redemptive plan.

How we think of the church is a big deal, indeed. If we see the local church as a kind of spiritual gas station, we will miss it! If we see the local church as a kind of spiritual movie theater, we will miss it! If we see the local church as a kind of spiritual drug store, we will miss it! If we see the local church as a kind of spiritual department store, we will miss it! How then should we see the church?

In the pages ahead, we will explore four master metaphors that profoundly reshape our imagination of what the church is and what it is designed to be and to do in our world.

**A Heartfelt Prayer**

*Heavenly Father, where do we begin? We simply begin our exploration with repentant, humble, and teachable hearts. We admit that each of us sees through a mirror dimly. Open our eyes to your truth! Open our hearts to your truth! Transform us and lead us through the power of the Holy Spirit to increasingly reflect to a needy world your beautiful bride as she was designed to be.*

**Notes**


5 C.S. Lewis, in his classic work *The Screwtape Letters*, speaks with penetrating clarity. “One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempers uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans.” C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harper Collins; reprint, 2001), 5.


8 Approximately 400 years of prophetic silence occur between the closing of the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament (from Malachi to Matthew).

9 For more information on these positions, see D. A. Carson, *Matthew, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 367-370.


14 Craig Van Gelder insightfully notes, “The church lives in the world as a human enterprise, but it is also the called and redeemed people of God. It is a people of God who are created by the Spirit to live as a missionary community…As such the church is both a social organization and a spiritual community…The church is God’s personal presence in the world through the Spirit. This makes the church, as a spiritual community, unique.” Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 25.

15 Ibid., 87.

16 Miroslav Volf notes, “The church is not simply an act of assembling; rather it assembles at a specific place (see 1 Corinthians 14:23). It is the people who in a specific way assemble at a specific place…The New Testament use, and especially the Pauline use, of ekklesia (“church”) confirms this understanding of church as an assembled community…ekklesia in the New Testament refers almost exclusively to the concrete assembly of Christians at a specific place.” Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness, The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1998), 137.


**Reflect on the following questions.**

- Take a moment to write out a timeline of your church history. What churches have you attended, for how long, in what years? What strikes you about your church history? What does the timeline reveal to you about what you think about the church?
Tom talks about a number of metaphors we use to view the church (i.e., the church as a Gas Station, Movie Theater, Drug Store, Big Box Retailer). Upon reflection and in light of your timeline, which of these metaphors, if any, best fit how you have related to the church? How does the way you have related to the church impact your faith? What do you think should change about the way you relate to the church?

Churches are often places where there is great relational conflict, which makes committing to a church difficult. In response, Tim Keller says: “The mistaken belief that a person must ‘clean up’ his or her own life in order to merit God’s presence is not Christianity. This means, though, that the church will be filled with immature and broken people who still have a long way to go emotionally, morally, and spiritually.” (Tim Keller, The Reason for God, 53) If Keller is right, how should we then view conflict in the church? What is the implication for how we love others in the church?
Tom quotes Paul Tournier who says, “There are two things we cannot do alone...one is to be married and the other is to be a Christian.” What are the liabilities and dangers of trying to live the Christian life alone? Why might the church be a necessary part of helping you grow into a more mature Christian?

Read Hebrews 10:23-25. Christianity from its inception has been about community. This is why Philip Yancey, as Tom references in Ekklesia, has said, “Christianity is not a purely intellectual, internal faith; it can only be lived out in community.” Think on this point in light of your group. How can those in your group help you live out your Christian faith? How can you aid those in your group to live out their Christian faith? Why does the author of Hebrews think it is so important to meet together?
ENGAGEMENT

- Write down the names of everyone in your community group and pray for them individually. As you are praying for each person, write down anything that comes to mind, a Scripture, a thought, a picture or image, and share it with that person if you feel it might encourage them.

- Practice Hebrews 10:23-25 by taking time to call, text, or email three people in your small group. Encourage them with some way you see God at work in a positive way in their life.
GROUP GATHERING

Watch the video for Session 5.
As a group discuss the following.

- Why do you think “I like Jesus, but I’m not crazy about His church” is such a prominent view in our culture? Why do you think so many now view the church and Jesus as separate from one another?

- Of Tom’s metaphors on the local church (Gas Station, Movie Theater, Drug Store, Big Box Retailer), which have been the way you have related to the church? What impact has that had on how you have viewed the church?

- Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-25. Based on these verses, why is the church important to Paul (v 21)? In light of these verses, what would you say should be the role of the church in your life personally?
Why do you think the church so often falls short of being the caring, gracious body of Christ it is meant to be? What can you personally do to help make the church a stronger place? What are some things your community group could do?

**Break into smaller groups of 3-4 and discuss the following, concluding with prayer.**

- Spend time sharing one thing you would like prayer for. As you listen to others share, if any Scriptures, thoughts, or encouragement come to mind, share it with them.

- After everyone is done sharing, pray for each other’s concerns. Pray also that God would bless your community group with strong community, and that God would bless your church to be the faithful body of Christ in your city.

**PREPARE FOR SESSION 6**

In preparation for the next Group Gathering, read and complete the Overview, Reflection, and Engagement sections of Session 6 (pages 93 - 107).
Every Sunday morning, Christians gather in community to worship, to listen, and to grow. And it seems many Monday mornings, Christians wake up and ask, “Now, what?” This burning discontent reveals that our lives were never meant to be divided into our “personal” faith and our “public” lives. Our Sunday worship and our Monday vocations are intimately connected and dependent on one another.

The life God invites us to is all-encompassing and has as much to say on Monday as it does on Sunday. The life God invites us to is not merely about getting “saved” and gathering with other Christians on Sunday mornings. It is also an invitation to interact with our fragmented society. The life we long to live invites us to give ourselves away in our vocations, in our neighborhood, city, and world.

What does this look like? A vivid picture of this comes in Jeremiah 29, especially verses 4-7:
Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Why should we give ourselves away to our cities? Jeremiah paints an important picture that we cannot miss.

**God cares for whole cities and communities, not just individuals.** God does not tell Israel to get ready for a mass exodus so they can leave the city. Rather, He calls them to put down roots and dig in. Start and grow families. Get to know neighbors. Build homes and invest in the economic engines that sustain the flourishing of the city. Instead of withdrawing from those around them, God calls Israel to thoughtfully engage the city to which He has sent them. God cares for cities, not just individuals.

**God calls us to give ourselves away to our neighbors.** The Hebrew word translated “welfare” is the Hebrew word “shalom,” which can also be translated as “peace.” But shalom means more than just the absence of discord. It describes life that is whole or complete, life as it was meant to be. God wants His people to seek the shalom of those around them, to give their lives away to their neighbors. Because as they selflessly seek the flourishing of their neighbors, they will flourish (Jeremiah 29:7).

**God calls us to pray for our cities.** God tells His people to pray for the people who conquered them, to pray for the city that destroyed Jerusalem, Israel’s home city. God’s people are not to contribute to the fragmentation of the city, but to its healing. If they would seek the good of the city for the sake of the city, both in active pursuit and in persistent prayer, then they would also
experience the overflow of God’s blessing in the flourishing of the city. They would see transformation and experience God’s goodness even in a foreign place.

Today, our cities are just as fragmented, full of broken homes and corrupt institutions. Our call is to seek the shalom of our city, even with all its fragmentation. Like God’s people have throughout history, we find ourselves in a period of waiting. We bear a dual citizenship of heaven and earth. We have tasted what is to come, and in the meantime we pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

This prayer Jesus taught us to pray is a reminder that we do not give of ourselves by ourselves. Our world is so broken and the need so great that seeking the welfare of our city can be overwhelming. So as a church we seek to be about proclaiming the Gospel, that individuals might find salvation. But we are also about cultural influence through our individual vocational callings and through our intentional partnerships within our city and world. Through our vocations, we do not simply earn a paycheck, but through God’s grace we are able to contribute to the shalom of our neighborhoods and cities.

What does it look like to seek the welfare, the shalom, “the common good” of our city? Andy Crouch, editor for Christianity Today, has written extensively on this topic, both in his book Culture Making, as well as the article “What’s So Great About the Common Good?” This article offers a brief glimpse of just what it might look like for you to seek the shalom of your neighborhood.

**Read the following excerpt.**
“What’s So Great About the Common Good?"a
by Andy Crouch

I’m not sure when I started hearing more about “the common good” from fellow Christians. But I’m pretty sure Christianity Today had something to do with it. This magazine spent 2005 exploring pastor Tim Keller’s proposal that Christians be “a counterculture for the common good.” Now we’re in the midst of This Is Our City: two years’ worth of articles, documentary films, and events for leaders in cities around North America. Our team has realized that what we’re really looking for are what we are calling “common-good decisions”—times when Christians make choices, some small and relatively easy (say, volunteering in a neighborhood school), others major and costly (say, moving into a tough school district), to seek the good of their neighborhoods.

The phrase also comes up in the perennial but newly vigorous conversation about the role Christians should play in American culture. Gordon College president Michael Lindsay titled his 2011 inaugural address “Faithful Leadership for the Common Good.” Gabe Lyons, who convenes diverse church and civic leaders every year at the Q conference, describes its mission as “ideas for the common good.” (Full disclosure: Lindsay and Lyons are friends, and their organizations have been the recipients of my family’s financial support and have paid me for speaking engagements.) The phrase appears three times in the National Association of Evangelicals’ (NAE) 2001 “call to civic responsibility” titled “For the Health of the Nation,” which CT editor in chief David Neff helped draft. After longtime vice president Richard Cizik left the NAE, he founded a new group called the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good.

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But a slogan isn’t the same thing as a vision. And the more I’ve thought about and vigorously promoted the phrase “the common good,” the less I’m sure we know what we mean by it.

**The Common What?**

All by itself, “the common good” is as vague as fine-sounding phrases tend to be. And being fine-sounding and vague, it easily becomes political pabulum to promote whatever policies the speaker wants to advance. Not surprisingly, it arises at times when politicians want to justify imposing costs on some part of society, as when Hillary Rodham Clinton told a group of donors in 2004, “We’re going to take things away from you on behalf of the common good.” To some ears, “the common good” echoes communism’s demands that all lesser goods yield to the construction of a people’s paradise. At the least, when we hear that some sacrifice will serve “the common good,” it’s reasonable to ask, “Sez who?”

It’s also reasonable to ask how far Christians can pursue a common good alongside people who believe in very different goods from us, or who question whether we can call anything “good” at all. It’s not just Christians who wonder about this: Secular thinkers have pushed back against the phrase on the grounds that no pluralistic society has the right to dictate a vision of the good for all its members. That was fine for European societies in the Dark Ages, they imply. But in the diverse and doubting 21st century, we have to settle for something thinner, something we can all agree on without stepping on one another’s metaphysical toes—allowing everyone “the pursuit of happiness” and calling it a day.

Christians, meanwhile, have reason to question visions of a world made right that omit the judgment, mercy, and grace of God. “The common good” has an awfully this-worldly ring to it. To believe we humans can achieve good on our own, even working together, without the radical intervention of God, is ultimately to deny the doctrines of Creation, Cross, Resurrection, and
Second Coming, just for starters. To exchange the dramatic biblical vision of history for “the common good” might seem like trading our birthright for a bowl of lukewarm oatmeal.

So, with all these weaknesses, why should Christians embrace the phrase?

Because it was these very follies that prompted Christians to recover the language of “the common good” in the first place.

An Old Idea
To understand the revival of “the common good,” we need to understand the man who did more than anyone else to restore it to Christian currency. Vincenzo Gioacchino Raffaele Luigi Pecci became Pope Leo XIII at a time when the papacy was descending. For a thousand years, the pope had been both a spiritual leader and a temporal ruler, commanding the allegiance of kings and directing affairs of state. But in 1870, Italian armies conquered the “Papal States,” regions once ruled by the Church, leaving the pope to govern only a tiny enclave of Rome. If the pope was not a ruler among rulers, what was he? That was the question Leo confronted when he began his 25-year papacy in 1878.

“[Leo] saw himself as a teacher… who sought a dialogue with the emerging secular powers of Europe,” Bradley Lewis, associate professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of America, told me. “Engaging with the culture was a key theme of Leo’s pontificate. He wrote 85 encyclicals on all kinds of topics.” (John Paul II wrote 14 of these authoritative letters during a papacy of comparable length.)

In Leo’s circumstances, we recognize a parallel to the circumstances of North American Protestants over the past century—once dominant in cultural institutions but increasingly sidelined from direct control. But rather than retreating from defining the Christian voice in a secular world, Leo and his advisers rose to the challenge, above all by returning to the reasoned
philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas’s work, informed by Aristotle and conversant with insurgent Islam, was the high-water mark of Catholic thought. And it was from Aquinas that Leo borrowed the language of the common good for his most influential encyclical, Rerum Novarum.

If we are not offering our neighbors the ultimate common good—the knowledge and love of God—we are not taking the idea of the common good seriously.

*Rerum novarum* simply means “of new things,” and the new things Leo had in mind were quite literally revolutionary: the rise of socialism and other workers’ movements that addressed the inequities of the new industrial world. Beyond seeking just wages, socialists scorned church and family and invested nearly messianic hope in a new government that would collectivize property and give power to the proletariat. A hundred years after the Russian Revolution, the flaws of the socialist vision (and the communism that followed it) are clear, but in Leo’s time, the socialists seemed to have history on their side.

*Rerum Novarum* was a bold response to both the plight of workers and the scorched-earth progressivism of the socialists. Leo agreed that workers deserved a fair wage—indeed, he was one of the first thinkers to posit that wages should be sufficient to allow hard-working people to provide for their families. But he insisted that the socialist dream of a property-free world, liberated from traditional virtues and relationships, would be disastrous. In particular, Leo argued that private property was not just a matter of private interest; when individuals tended to their own land and possessions faithfully, they made a crucial contribution to “the common good.”

*Rerum Novarum* launched the movement called Catholic social thought. Successive popes and other Christian thinkers picked up on Leo’s themes, defining the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow
people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” Two ideas are particularly significant in this definition. The common good is measured by fulfillment or flourishing—by human beings becoming all they are meant to be. And the common good is about persons, both groups and individuals—not just about “humanity” but about humans, and not just about individuals but about persons in relationship with one another in small groups.

While *Rerum Novarum* did not prevent the rise of communism in Eastern Europe, it did help Christians resist its totalizing worldview even through decades of repression. One of those Christians, a Polish priest named Karol Wojtyła, occupied Leo’s chair and played a pivotal role in the demise of the system whose baleful consequences Leo had foreseen.

**Small is Good**

The common good can help us avoid two modern temptations—one on the left and one on the right. “Leftists tend to be concerned about ‘humanity’ as a collective,” Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith told me via e-mail. “If some heads have to roll to improve humanity’s lot, so be it. A commitment to the common good opposes that entirely. Each and every person has dignity—the good society is one which allows the thriving of all persons, especially the weak and vulnerable.”

And yet, Smith pointed out, “the common good” challenges the libertarian stream of conservatism as well: “Individualists only want to see each individual live as they please, as long as they don’t obstruct the ability of other individuals to do the same. They don’t think anything is ‘common,’ except whatever minimal infrastructures are needed to create equal opportunity.”

Focusing on the common good has another positive effect, Smith noted: It can both draw Christians into engagement with the wider society and prevent that engagement from becoming “all about politics.” Essential to
the common good, all the way back through Aquinas to Aristotle, has been the insight that the best forms of human flourishing happen in collectives that are smaller than, and whose origins are earlier than, the nation-state. Family above all, but also congregations, guilds, and clubs—these “private associations,” with all their particular loyalties, paradoxically turn out to be essential to public flourishing. If we commit ourselves to the common good, we must become more public in our thinking and choices, and at the same time not too public. The common good is sustained most deeply where people know each other’s names and faces—especially when it comes to the care of the vulnerable, who need more than policies to flourish.

Seeking the common good in its deepest sense means continually insisting that persons are of infinite worth—worth more than any system, any institution, or any cause. Societies are graded on a curve, with the fate of the most vulnerable given the most weight, because the fate of the most vulnerable tells us whether a society truly values persons as ends or just as means to an end.

And the common good continually reminds us that persons flourish in the small societies that best recognize them as persons—in family and the face-to-face associations of healthy workplaces, schools, teams, and of course churches. Though it is a big phrase, “the common good” reminds us that the right scale for human flourishing is small and specific, and that the larger institutions of culture make their greatest contribution to flourishing when they resist absorbing all smaller allegiances.

**The Ultimate Good**

For a while, the Q conference used the tagline, “Ideas that create a better world.” But Gabe Lyons became dissatisfied with it. “I saw an ad for ‘furniture that creates a better world.’ I wanted something with much more Christian grounding, something that would give us a definition of what the ‘better world’ is.” For Lyons, “the common good” in its Christian definition...
is especially valuable for insisting on the dignity of every person. Lyons distinguishes the common good—"the most good for all people"—from narrower ideas like “the public interest,” which he paraphrases as “the most good for the most people.” The common good, Lyons says, is not another word for utilitarianism—doing whatever would make the greatest number of people happiest, even if some people have to suffer. Instead, it is a bulwark against utilitarian calculations that might conclude, for example, that “a better world would be one without disabled people.”

But Lyons also thinks “the common good” helps Christians better articulate their commitment to a pluralistic society. There was a time when Christians might have focused on “caring for those who believe like we believe,” says the Liberty University alumnus. “But the common good requires us to care for all people—loving our neighbor no matter what they believe.”

Seeking the common good, then, requires taking the phrase as seriously as its rich history demands. And this richer version of the common good could have beneficial effects.

First, the common good can give us common ground with our neighbors. We may not agree with them—indeed, Christians don’t always agree with one another—about what exactly human flourishing looks like. But the common good is a conversation starter rather than a conversation ender. It can move us away from pitched battles over particular issues and help us reveal the fundamental questions that often lie unexplored behind them. In a time when many conversations between people with different convictions seem to end before they begin, we simply need more conversation starters.

But equally important, the common good allows us to stake out our Christian convictions about what is good for humans—and to dare our neighbors to clarify their own convictions. “In the simplest sense,” Bradley Lewis said, “the common good is God. It is God who satisfies what people
need, individually and communally.” Adopting the language of the common good means owning this bedrock Christian belief and proclaiming it to our neighbors. If we are not offering our neighbors the ultimate common good—the knowledge and love of God—we are not taking the idea of the common good seriously.

Perhaps best of all, the common good is a matter of choices, not just ideas. And those choices are often local, not grand social schemes. My decisions about where to live and what to eat and buy, as well as what to grow and create, whom to befriend and where to volunteer, whom to employ and how much to pay, aren’t just about my private fulfillment. They will also either contribute to others’ flourishing or undermine it.

Indeed, all things that are truly good are common goods, meant to be shared and enjoyed together. And if the return of “the common good” reminds us of that truth and that hope, and shapes the way we live among our neighbors, it will have done a world of good.

Andy Crouch, executive producer of “This Is Our City,” is the author of Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling (InterVarsity Press) and a forthcoming book on power.
Reflect on the following questions:

- Take a moment to read Jeremiah 29:1-9. In light of Andy’s article and Jeremiah 29, what do you think it means to seek the common good, or the “welfare” (v 7) of the city? Why do you think it is important to God that we seek the common good of our neighbors, our city, and our world?

- One of the primary ways we can contribute to the common good is through our vocational callings, whether you are a stay-at-home mom, a CEO, or a barista. In light of Jeremiah 29, Andy’s article, and your own vocational calling, reflect on how your vocation can help you contribute to the common good. What are some specific ways you can contribute?
In his article, Andy Crouch writes, “Seeking the common good in its deepest sense means continually insisting that persons are of infinite worth—worth more than any system, any institution, or an cause. Societies are graded on a curve, with the fate of the most vulnerable given the most weight, because the fate of the most vulnerable tells us whether a society truly values persons as ends or just as means to an end.” Take a moment and think about how the vulnerable are or aren’t flourishing in your community. What needs (spiritual, economic, social) have you observed? What role could you individually or your group play in seeking the good of the vulnerable around you?
In Jeremiah 29, God encourages the Israelites to plant gardens and eat of their produce. This is not surprising because Israel was an agrarian society, and most Israelites would have been gifted in gardening. Take a moment and list out your gifts; what you are good at doing. Spend time thanking God for how He has gifted you, and ask Him to show you ways you can use your giftedness to contribute to the welfare of your family, neighborhood, or city. Write down anything that comes to mind.

ENGAGEMENT

Read Matthew 22:36-40. The two great commands of the Bible are to love God and love our neighbors. Take a moment and draw a tic-tac-toe board, with a picture representing your own home in the middle (see artofneighboring.com for an example). As best you can, fill out the other eight spaces with the names of the people who live in the eight closest homes to you. Spend some time praying for those people you don’t know, and pray that God would open the door for you to learn the names and get to know the people who live nearest to you.
As you are out this week, snap two photos to share in your group this week. First, take a photo of an example of something that is flourishing in your neighborhood or city. Second, take a photo of something that is broken in your city. As you spend time in prayer this week, give thanks to God for what is flourishing, and pray for what is broken.
GROUP GATHERING

Watch the video for Session 6.
As a group discuss the following.

- What is the worst job or the worst boss you ever had? What was one redeeming quality of the job that enabled you to keep going to work?

- Tom quoted Dorothy Sayers who said, “The only Christian work is good work well done.” What do you think she meant by this statement? Why do you think Tom emphasized the importance of vocations as contribution to the common good?

- Read Jeremiah 29:4-7. What do you think God means when He intends for us to “seek the welfare of the city?” Why do you think God includes prayer as a prominent way to seek the welfare of the city?

- Tom talked about how it is easy for Christians to either distance or isolate themselves from their neighbors. Why do you think it has been so easy for
churches to do this? What are some ways you have seen churches remain distant from their neighbors and cities? What are some ways you have seen churches successfully engage their neighborhoods and cities?

**Break into smaller groups of 3-4 and discuss the following, concluding with prayer.**

- Share one way you currently contribute to the common good of your family, neighborhood, or city with your group. Also share one way you hope to better contribute to the common good of your family, neighborhood, or city.

- After each person has shared, spend time thanking God for gifting each of you to seek the welfare of the city, and pray He would enable each of you to be a “faithful presence” in the city for its shalom.

**CONCLUSION**

Over the past several weeks, we have laid out the path to the flourishing, tome life God has designed for us to live. It is a life made possible through the cross, revealed in the Bible, accessible in being yoked to Master Jesus, available in the community of God’s people, the church, and evidenced through a life of faithful presence in our city.

The pursuit of this life, the life you long to live, will at times be frustrating and at times fulfilling. It is both exhausting and exhilarating. The life you long for will never be found through an individual quest, but it must be empowered by God’s Spirit, filled with God’s grace, and sought in a community of God’s people.
Although the curriculum ends here, the community you have built does not. Keep pursuing the life God has designed for you together, and may the words of Hebrews 10:23-25 be the prayer and passion of your group:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

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